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***Theatrical Experience in search of God ;  
Pessimism and Promise:  
Eugene O'Neill and Samuel Beckett***

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## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed by myself only. Except for ideas and passages properly acknowledged in the text, this writing is all my own work. The work has not been previously submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed,

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Lastly, I dedicate this thesis to Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

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## Abbreviations

<b>B. T.</b>	<i>The Birth of Tragedy</i>
<b>L. J. N.</b>	<i>Long Day's Journey Into Night</i>
<b>W. G.</b>	<i>Waiting for Godot</i>

## Introduction

“Que Voulez-Vous?” : what do you expect? (*Waiting for Godot* 56)

“What is it I’m looking for? I know it’s something I lost.”  
(*Long Day’s Journey into Night* 107)

These similar questions are addressed by Samuel Beckett and Eugene O’Neill in their dramas. Interestingly, Beckett’s “Que Voulez-Vous?” and O’Neill’s “What am I looking for?” resonate with Christ’s question to his two followers: “What do you want?” (John 1:38) This simple but crucial question strikes at the heart of humanity, hankering for something that they have lost and not yet found; this something may be God.

Modernist theatre relies on the Nietzschean concept of ‘the death of God’. This point is seen to relate to the work of Eugene O’Neill and Samuel Beckett. Both O’Neill and Beckett were brought up in pious Irish families. Nonetheless, their reaction to their Irish roots was mixed with blasphemy, and nostalgia for the loss of their Christian heritage. My thesis in this respect addresses the following question: how do O’Neill and Beckett represent on stage their spiritual frustration and longing for God? To examine this question, I explore representative drama by O’Neill and Beckett, focusing upon tragedy, nihilistic philosophy, and Christianity. Drawing on these sources, this thesis aims to analyse a theatrical aesthetic that, despite initial appearances, exhibits a strong metaphysical and theological dimension.

This thesis is divided into two main parts. In the first part, I examine O’Neill’s *Beyond the Horizon*, *The Fountain*, *Lazarus Laughed*, *The Hairy Ape*,

*Dynamo, and Long Day's Journey Into Night*. In the second part, I focus on Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The conclusion reads these two distinct playwrights in conjunction by formulating comparative observation. In this regard, I try to connect their work with different perspectives, taking account of literary, philosophical and theological approaches. This interdisciplinary reading can neither completely eliminate repetitions nor overcome the fragmentary nature of each approach. Nevertheless, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which the works of O'Neill and Beckett conceive of Christianity in both its positive and negative characterization.



## **Part I. Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953)**

### **1. Social Tragedy: *The Hairy Ape* and *Dynamo***

Ostensibly both of O'Neill's plays, *The Hairy Ape* and *Dynamo* depict a relationship between humanity and machinery. In a deeper sense, however, they address a more fundamental question: what does it mean to be fully human in the 'death of God'? Through this connection, this paper will examine these two plays, which exhibit O'Neill's social and religious concerns.

*The Hairy Ape* is a story of a fireman called Yank. He works in the stokehole, shovelling coal into a furnace as a part of the process of making steel for a ship's engine. Yank's physical strength makes him confident in his work. However, when Mildred, a daughter of the president of the company, humiliates Yank with an insulting remark "the filthy beast," Yank is shocked, and starts questioning his identity. After leaving the steel company, Yank wanders around Manhattan in search of a place where he might feel as though he belongs. After painful rejections in various places, Yank visits the zoo, where he finds a kindred being, a gorilla in a cage. Assuming that the ape can be his friend, Yank opens the cage. However, he is attacked by the gorilla and he dies in the cage.

This play delivers Karl Marx's ideas of class division, and the alienation of labour. As Marx assumes, the world in the drama is divided into two compartments: one for the ruling upper class and the other for the exploited working class. This drama particularly focuses on what is happening in the latter, a stokehole which: "is crowded with men, shouting, cursing, laughing, singing ... the bewildered, furious, baffled defiance of a beast in a cage." (*Hairy Ape* 5) As if it is a land of barbarians,

ruled by a natural law of survival, this naturalistic description of the stokehole displays at the heart of culture the pre-human wildness, which is irrational, violent and uncontrollable. Interestingly, the burning furnace creates a terrifyingly unrealistic impression as much as a naturalistic one. It describes the place where:

*a line of men, stripped to the waist, is before the furnace door ... They use the shovels to throw open the furnace doors. Then from these fiery round holes in the black a flood of terrific light and heat pours full upon the men who are outlined in silhouette in the crouching, inhuman attitudes of chained gorillas.*  
(*Hairy Ape* 28)

Here, O'Neill employs expressionistic stagecraft like the "flood of terrific light and heat." The overflowing fiery light and heat fill the stage with resplendent colour. In addition to this spectacular visual effect, the dreadful strangeness of the atmosphere is amplified with a beating sound:

*There is a tumult of noise – the brazen clang of the furnace doors as they are flung open or slammed shut, the grating, teeth-gritting grind of steel against steel, of crunching coal, This clash of sounds stuns one's ears with its rending dissonance. But there is order in it, rhythm, a mechanical regulated recurrence, a tempo. And rising above all, making the air hum with the quiver of liberated energy, the roar of leaping flames in the furnace, the monotonous throbbing beat of the engines.* (Ibid.)

Just as a dithyrambic chorus in Attic theatre brings out an outburst of daemonic energy, "the throbbing beat of the engines" calls for murderous violence and irrational destructiveness. The great whirlwind of supernatural sound is sweeping the characters away uncontrollably into a madness of excitement. This hellish climate of the underworld elicits "a sense of impersonality, vacuity, and grotesque savagery," as if it is a "surrealistic nightmare" in the words of Valgemaë Mardi. (231) The expressionistic portrait of the foundry not only serves to highlight a primitive savage in the midst of an industrial world, but also reveals O'Neill's subjective impression and feeling of horror towards it. In the play, the central character, Yank is a

proletarian coal worker, and his co-workers Paddy and Long compare their working place with “hell”:

LONG: This is ‘ell. We lives in ‘ell, Comrades - and right enough we’ll die in it...All men is born free and ekal ... They dragged us down till ship, sweatin’, burnin’ up eatin’ coal-dust! ... the damned capitalist clarss! (11)

PADDY: Yank-black, smoke from the funnels smudging the sea, smudging the decks-the bloody engines pounding and throbbing and shaking ... choking our lungs wid coal dust-breaking our backs and hearts in the hell of the stokehole-feeding the bloody furnace-feeding our lives along wid the coal. (15)

Here, Long’s Marxist speech in keeping with my argument clearly reflects Marxist theory. One of the greatest failures of the political economic system, according to Marx, is “the externalization of labour”(61), which leads to alienation. In this regard, Marx states:

Labour is external to the labourer – that is, it is not part of his nature – and so the worker does not affirm himself in his work but denies himself, feels miserable, and unhappy, develops no free physical and mental energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind. (61-2)

The steel work alienates the workers in the drama. It recklessly exploits their labour, giving them nothing but “deprivation, hovels, mutilation, imbecility and cretinism,” in return, whereas it produces in Marx’s words, “marvels, palaces, beauty, and intelligence” for the wealthy. (61) As if living in a hell, Long and Paddy feel that their bodies and minds are perpetually exhausted and tormented by work. However the protagonist, Yank, feels differently. Unlike them, work makes Yank feel energized and fairly content, as he says:

YANK: I’m livin’ ... Sure I’m par of de engines! ... It’s me makes it hot! It’s me makes it roar! It’s me makes it move! ... I’m de end! I’m de start! ... And I’m what makes iron into steel! Steel, dat stands for de whole ting! And I’m steel-steel-steel. (17)

Yank feels so alive and powerful during work. He believes that the work provides him with not only an inexhaustible vigour of life, but also a great sense of belonging.

He even proudly claims that he is a part of the steel. In this regard, Marx says: “it [capitalism] displaces labor through machines, but it throws some workers back into barbarous labor and turns others into machines.” (61) Unfortunately, Yank simply cannot understand what is wrong with his being like part of a machine. Why does Yank fail to recognize that his existence has been diminished to “the level of a commodity, the most miserable commodity?” (Marx 58) As a reason for this, Marx writes: “it [labour] produces intelligence, but for the worker it produces imbecility.”(61) While the tough labour makes Yank physically strong, his intellectual faculty becomes alarmingly weakened. Concerning this imbalance of body and mind, Marx finds its cause in “the division of mental and material labour.”

He writes:

The division of labor ... is expressed also in the ruling class as the division of mental and material labor, so that within this class one part appears as the thinkers of the class ... while the other's attitude toward these ideas and illusion is more passive and receptive. (130)

Applying this assumption to Yank's case, his material work, which requires no mental effort, prevents him from having his own independent ideas and imagination. When Paddy accuses Yank of being like a slave, who had no freedom of thought or imagination, Yank retorts with contempt: “T’inkin’ and dreamin’ what’ll that get yuh? What’s t’inkin’ got to do wit it? We move, don’t we? Speed, ain’tit?” (19) As Yank defends himself, it becomes clear that the activities of thinking, dreaming or being creative are of no use to him. Instead, what the work requires from him is to have a strong body, and so this makes it possible for him to produce more products by running the machine more speedily. The more he produces, the more he feels valuable, and the more important to himself in the company. This belief, in fact, is a mere illusion, which is invented by the ruling class, according to Marx's theory. The

idea that labour produces “the common interest of all members of society” (130), Marx argues, is idealistic, but not necessarily realistic. In reality, he explains: “labour produces marvels for the wealthy, but it produces deprivation for the worker. It produces palaces, but hovels for the worker. It produces beauty but mutilation for the worker.” (61) From Marx’s point of view, the value that is created through Yank’s toil is not returned to him directly, but to someone else, the steel company. This results in Yank’s alienation from both his labour and the product, but also from nature.

In a natural state, a human being is considered to be a rational animal, as Marx conceives: “That the physical and spiritual life of man is tied up with nature is another way of saying that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.” (63) The spiritual life, in Marx’s thinking, means to be rational, sentient, and intellectual, and it is inseparably joined with the corporeal. This natural union of the body and the soul, Marx asserts, has been broken by the separation of the physical work from the mental work, with the former unfairly devalued. Here, Marx assumes that the conflict in human nature is caused by the division of works. Marx’s theology of the worker alienated from nature is valid in the case of O’Neill’s characters. The coal stokers behave like brutal animals, dissociated from their rational human nature:

the men themselves should resemble those pictures in which the appearance of Neanderthal Man is guessed at. All are hairy-chested, with arms of tremendous power, and low, receding brows above their small, fierce, resentful eyes.  
(*Hairy Ape* 5-6)

Among these Neanderthal firemen, the central character, Yank stands out with his radical resemblance to a “hairy ape.” Yet, he doesn’t seem to mind much about his hideous appearance. On the contrary, he is proud of his monster-like overgrown body, as his fellow workers: “respect his [Yank’s] superior strength – the grudging respect of fear.” (*Hairy Ape* 6) Yank’s outstanding physical strength makes him feel superior

to the others, receiving their fearful envy. However, his confidence and pride at work are completely shattered when a pretty daughter of his company's boss, Mildred, visits the workplace. Shocked by Yank's repulsive ape-like appearance, Mildred openly expresses her repugnance towards him. Being insulted as a "filthy beast" by the young lady, Yank feels deeply hurt and humiliated, as Doris V. Falk comments: "Yank's experience with Mildred has wounded him in the heart of his pride." (58) The encounter with Mildred not only destroys Yank's primitive pride, but also stirs a doubt in him about his identity. He has believed that he is a valuable member of the company. This sense of belonging and self-importance at work makes it possible for him to carry on the hard labour. After the incident with Mildred, however, he comes to acknowledge the fact that those outside of work see him differently. They conceive him as something less than human – a brute. This disharmony between the reality and the illusion of his self-image leads to a terrible confusion within him, bringing him to the point of self-destruction.

From Marx's point of view, the protagonist is an injured victim of industrial capitalism, which radically alienates the worker from the work and his/her human nature. Marx specifically locates this division of human nature in the malfunction of a particular political economy. To examine the drama's conflict only from a Marxist viewpoint is limiting as humanity's conflicted nature is not only a social problem, but also considered to be a universal and existential condition. Therefore, I will now approach the drama from a more philosophical and theological perspective, simultaneously closely engaging with its theatrical form; the message and the form here are inseparable.

On December 24, 1921, O'Neill, in his letter to Kenneth Macgowan, wrote:

“Well, *The Hairy Ape* – first draft – was finished yesterday ... I don’t think the play as a whole can be fitted into any of the current ‘isms’.” (qtd. in Bogard 241) O’Neill’s pioneering theatrical experiment, distinct from any existing theatrical convention, was initially encouraged by the new theatrical movement called Art Theatre. Travis Bogard comments:

The style of the play [*The Hairy Ape*], which must have seemed exactly what the proponents of the Art Theatre ordered, placed O’Neill as an experimenter far to the front of the avant-garde in America, and doubtless confirmed his decision to experiment with new forms of theatre. (242)

The Art Theatre movement is primarily conceptualized by Sheldon Cheney. In 1914, Cheney published *The New Movement in the Theatre*. In this book, he states: “in the theatre and in the Church, the deeper chords of spirituality are touched as nowhere else in life. (qtd. in Bogard 213) Here, Cheney emphasizes the spiritual aspects of the new religious theatre. Correspondingly, Cheney’s contemporary critic, Kenneth Macgowan also writes in *The Theatre of Democracy*:

the spiritual elements of theatre go back to the emotional roots of instinctive racial drama even while they build on to conscious study and interpretation of instinct and intuition and in general the whole vast field of the unconscious mind of man. (qtd. in Engel 73)

This stress on the spiritual root of drama is seen as a reaction to the materialistic culture of America in the early twentieth century. In this regards, Macgowan notes:

America has no art and no religion which can make drama religious. America does not believe, in any deep sense. Science has shattered dogma, and formal religion has not been able to absorb an artistic or a philosophic spirit great enough to recreate the religious spirit in men. (qtd. in Engel 69)

Along with the decline of art and religion, Macgowan criticises American theatre as degraded to a mere form of amusement, lacking any serious spiritual depth. The commercialization of American theatre was compared to “almost any commercial production sought to reproduce the surfaces of life in the shallowest manner” as

Bogard describes it. (173) Out of this discontentment with the superficial and materialistic manner of realistic art in America, Art Theatre searches for an innovative theatrical method, attempting to restore theatre's *raison d'être*; that is, to make the intangible reality of spiritual life accessible to our senses of sight and hearing. This supreme ideal of art – to express something transcendental – prompted O'Neill to undertake an adventurous theatrical experiment. *Lazarus Laughed* is a good example of this. In this play, O'Neill uses an expressionist aesthetic in this drama. This method intends to visualize a Dionysian world that is sensually spiritual and supernatural, full of gods, myths, and superstitions. On the contrary, in *The Hairy Ape*, the city is godless, empty of any spiritual or supernatural facets. Instead of the superhuman Dionysian god, there is a Neanderthal-like crowd working in a steel factory. In a form of naturalism, O'Neill exposes the characters to the extreme point of brutal nudity, stripping away all the metaphysical elements of the human being. In the exclusion of the spirit, a human body is purely biological, no different to animals. In the play, it is noticeable that the characters resemble untamed wild animals, rather than actual human beings. Such a depiction of the human figure is more than naturalistic. It is shockingly grotesque, and disturbingly repugnant in an expressionistic manner. Regarding the drama's style, Bogard notes:

*The Hairy Ape* ... is a play prompted in its stylistic development by Macgowan's enthusiasm that splits the ticket sharply between realism and the new expressionism. Stylistically, it lies at a half-way point in O'Neill's career. (245)

In the middle way between realism and expressionism, O'Neill embraces both a naturalistic objectivity and an expressionistic subjectivity. Yet it is, in style, closer to the latter, as O'Neill himself testifies: "it [*The Hairy Ape*] seems to run the whole gamut from extreme naturalism to extreme expressionism – with more of the latter



than the former.” (qtd. in Bogard 241) Here, O’Neill states that the play is dominated by expressionism over naturalism. This claim is supported by the shockingly dismal portrayal of the stokehole and the unnaturally distorted physical images of the human characters on stage. As for the expressionistic treatment of the stage-setting, and of the characters, Bogard claims that it “is chiefly decorative.” (245) In Bogard’s view, the expressionistic theatricality makes the play sumptuously impressive, sensually enchanting, and spectacular in its appearance. Besides this cosmetic reason, however, O’Neill has a more serious intention in employing this expressionistic style in his drama: it serves to highlight the horror of the modern secular hell. The stokehole symbolizes a world in which God is dead; it is a mechanized, animalistic, spiritless world. In the death of God, and of the spirit, the vacuum is filled with a primitive cruelty, and animalistic sensuality. As for the dehumanizing working conditions, this drama, in Marxist terms, criticizes the capitalism that destroys man’s harmony with nature. Nonetheless, the core of the matter in the play rests on the issue of the death of God.

*Yank can be seen within crouched on the edge of his cot in the attitude of Rodin’s “The Thinker.”*(34)

In reference to this scene, Bogard explains:

the Rodin sculpture held for O’Neill an evolutionary significance appropriate to the play – brutish man attempting to puzzle out the truth of his existence and perhaps to better it, mind triumphing over brute force. Rodin’s bronze, however, is far from pessimistic. (246)

Rodin’s *The Thinker* projects O’Neill’s concern for the origin of human nature. The “brutish man”, Yank, starts questioning who he truly is. To think means to relate things in a logical order, as G.K. Chesterton defines: “thinking means connecting things, and stops if they cannot be connected.” (56) Unfortunately, the process of

linking separate things seems too complicated for the simple-minded Yank to cope with. As soon as Yank tries to think deeply, he simply gets more confused. Yank's frustration comes from the fact that he cannot connect his split images of being an animal and a man. In other words, as Doris V. Falk notes, Yank is "alienated from the totality of himself." (58) It is as though two different entities, hostile to one another, dwell within him. Yank cannot see himself as one unified being: His animalistic impulse is in conflict with his rationality. Yank's "loss of feeling himself as an organic whole," is closely related to his loss of imagination and appearance of being human. To be human, here, means to be able to think, and to imagine. However, Yank is alienated from the intellectual part of human nature. His mindless work makes him mentally crippled, incapable of reasoning. Yank's predicament echoes the thought of Bertrand Russell, who states that:

apes in the zoo imagine that they feel they ought to become men, but cannot discover the secret of how to do it ... something of the same strain and anguish seems to have entered the soul of civilised men. He knows there is something better than himself almost within his grasp, yet he does not know where to seek it or how to find it. In despair he rages against his fellow man, who is equally lost and equally unhappy. (62)

Just like Russell's apes, Yank, despite his bestial outlook, feels that he ought to be more than an animal, but he cannot grasp the depth of what it means to be human. Yank, in conflict with himself, faces an impossible choice between being an unconscious beast or a thinking being. Although he imitates the posture of 'The Thinker', he cannot entirely relate himself to it. As an alternative, he chooses to be like an animal; he deliberately flings himself into the mouth of a gorilla in the zoo. Interestingly, Yank's suicidal action has in common with the Greek myth of Narcissus. Just as Narcissus immerses himself in the water that mirrors his image, Yank relates himself to the brutal animal in a cage, and plunges into it. They both

desire to be fully integrated into the reflected images of their outer selves. However, there is a difference between them: while Yank's action is motivated by self-hate, and self-destructiveness, Narcissus's is prompted by self-admiration and self-preservation; Narcissus, in love with his own image, wishes to eternally preserve his beauty. The "deeper meaning of that story of Narcissus," Herman Melville writes, it is about the one:

who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers, and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to all. (14)

Applying this analysis to Yank, his self-destruction is caused by his failure to reconcile the "tormenting" self-image of the beast with "the mild image" of humanity; he is unable to grasp the fathomless secret of being fully human, which passes beyond the confines of his animal nature.

Returning to the main question, in what sense is Yank's tragic experience related to the 'death of God'? In Christianity, it is believed that an individual person is created in the image and likeness of a loving and compassionate God. According to this teaching, such recognition of the significance of existence can be obtained through a loving relationship with others. From this theological point of view, it is really hard for Yank to grasp the significance of his self in the absence of human companionship. Yank is regarded as an abject wild animal on account of his appearance. In addition to his abusive father, for instance, Yank is rejected by almost every facet of society, including his co-workers, Mildred, the citizens of Fifth Avenue, and the I.W.W. (The Industrial Workers of the World). They treat him as either a redundant object or a revolting animal. The brutality of the mechanical world severs his need of belonging, and relationships. For him, this is the experience of death in

life: “death is life, lose human contact, and the powers of sympathy, hope, humility and belief in man.” (Bogard 419) In an indifferent and unsympathetic society, Yank feels desolated, and thoroughly alone to the point of madness; he imagines that he has become an ape. As the drama’s finale shows, Yank’s imagined loss of human likeness is irredeemable in a world where neither compassion nor charity can penetrate. At the end, he comes to the fatal conclusion that he is, as people see him, a ‘thing’, a monster, condemned to die in solitude. In short, O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* essentially displays humanity’s loss of a sense of belonging, and of existential significance in a spiritless world. This loss is a central theme in modern theatre, informed by Marxism, Existentialism, and Christianity.

O’Neill’s concern with the ‘death of God’ is expressed more explicitly in his subsequent play, *Dynamo*. Before beginning this discussion, a short summary of the play follows. The main character, Reuben, is secretly in love with Ada, the daughter of his family’s enemy. Her father, Fife, humiliates Reuben and his own father, Reverend Light, mocking their religion. Looking for support, Reuben confides in his mother, who, envious of her son’s love for another woman, betrays him to the wrathful Reverend Light. Consequently, renouncing his father, and his father’s Puritanism, Reuben flees home. Instead of his father’s religion, Reuben is zealously converted to Fife’s atheistic belief in electricity, worshiping the dynamos of the Fifes’ hydro-electrical plant. His blind fanaticism kills Ada and he sacrifices himself at the altar of electricity.

As for the protagonist, Reuben, it is interesting to examine two different considerations, suggested by Doris V. Falk and Edwin A. Engle. Engle regards Reuben as a prototype of the tragic hero in the America of O’Neill’s day, as he writes:

Reuben is a personification. He represents the American of today who has outgrown the Old Testament religion of his ancestors, who casts about for a substitute and finds only what science and materialism have to offer. (232)

From Engle's point of view, Reuben is a symbolic figure of American society, where religion is in conflict with science. On the other hand, Falk sees Reuben as nothing but a fanatic, as she says: "Reuben is not a universal or representative figure, but only a poor lunatic at the mercy of his unconscious drives." (129) Falk understands Reuben's fall as a private matter, caused by a psychological disorder or failure of nerve. However, O'Neill's own consideration of his tragic hero is closer to Engle's rather than Falk's; "*Dynamo* is," O'Neill writes, "a symbolic and factual biography of what is happening in a large section of the American (and not only American) soul right now." (qtd. in Bogard 321) According to Jennifer Wallace:

America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a culture ... struggling to establish a new identity. Americans found that old assumptions and expectations might no longer be relevant and that new structures of faith and value would need to be developed. This general sense of confusion and potential disillusion was ripe for tragic exploration. (75)

Americans during the Twenties, in trying to construct a new country, faced with a challenging task to sever ties with the Old World, in which inherited Christian beliefs prevails, whether Puritanism or Catholicism. Based on this social and cultural background, O'Neill's *Dynamo* depicts a conflict between old and new values. Yet this play is, in a deeper sense, concerned with the tragic experience of the death of God, as Bogard states: "*Dynamo* appears to most to be concerned with the death of God." (322) Incorporated with this subject matter, *Dynamo* raises two crucial questions about truth and morality.

In Act II, Reuben, in denial of his father's religion, expresses his ambitious project to discover his own kind of truth by saying: "I want to face truth. I won't ever

be satisfied now until I've found the truth about everything.” (469) The term “truth” in this drama is used with two different connotations: one is a spiritual/religious belief, and the other is an empirical/secular knowledge. The latter entails science, and materialism, whereas the former is found in the Calvinist gospel of Reuben's father. These two different kinds of truth stand in hostile opposition to each other, just as Reuben's father, a fundamentalist minister, feuds with his atheist neighbour, Ramsay Fife, who works in an electrical company. Although ostensibly the play depicts the contradiction between religion and science, it fundamentally disputes about what truth is, and who God is.

At the beginning of the play, Reuben is described as an obedient son of a minister, who firmly believes in his father's Calvinistic doctrine. However, Reuben, in love with Fife's daughter, breaks his father's command not to make any contact with the atheist family. Consequently, finding out his son's disobedience, Reverend Light recklessly starts whipping him, “*bursting into a fatuous rage.*” (452) This outrageously abusive behaviour comes from his inner insecurity in defending his position as a minister and a father. This is exhibited in his voice. The play depicts his voice as “the bullying one of a sermonizer who is the victim of an inner uncertainty that compensates itself by being booming overassertive.” (422) The violently forceful manner of speaking is to disguise his “inner uncertainty,” as depicted above. The “inner uncertainty” makes him aggressively intolerant to those in opposition to him. He simply cannot stand anyone who challenges him, especially his neighbour, Fife, whose scientific atheism tests his belief. The pastor's determination to sustain his faith has little to do with religious truth, instead, he uses it to maintain his authoritarian position as patriarch in his congregation and in his family. Here, it is

interesting to notice that Reuben's father is called 'Light.' His name is symbolic, carrying a theological meaning that God is the Light of the world, and of Truth. In other words, truth, in the domain of Christianity, is considered to be a revelation of God. Based on this religious doctrine, Light imposes on Reuben the idea that God is the one absolute truth, and He reveals Himself in the form of thunder to condemn sinners. This superstitious belief terrifies Reuben greatly. On seeing a great flash of lightning, Reuben *stands paralyzed with superstitious terror, and* cries "I'm afraid of God!" (444) This fear of a condemning God makes Reuben servile to what his father claims to be 'true'. Such a coercive truth, replete with terrifyingly supernatural fancies, paralyzes Reuben's will to make his own decision. In order to assert his freedom, he denounces the Calvinistic conviction, and instead arms himself with the latest scientific knowledge. Reuben, *indicating the books he carries*, says:

I'm studying a lot of science. Sometimes I've gone without eating to buy books – and often I've read all night – books on astronomy and biology and physics and chemistry and evolution. (458)

Reuben expects that his newly acquired science-oriented secular studies will liberate him from the oppressive terror that is created by his father's outdated superstition. Now, becoming a liberal modern thinker in his conversion, Reuben *looks up and gives a wild laugh as though the thunder elated him as he shouts up at the sky*: "Shoot away, Old Bozo! I'm not scared of You!" (452) In his triumphant victory to overcome his fear of God-Father, Reuben more boldly claims: "There is no God! No God but Electricity! I'll never be scared again! I'm through with the lot of you!" (453) Reuben counteracts lightning in the sky with electricity on earth; the former signifies the old religious light of truth, God, whereas the latter is the new empirical light of scientific truth. Reuben lies between these poles, however, and is torn apart by their

contradiction. Although the clap of thunder, a sign of God's anger, no longer makes him frightened, he faces another kind of terror; to live and to die alone. When he discovers his mother's sudden death, Reuben, left alone in the room, is *thinking bitterly*:

There's something queer about this dump now ... as if no one was living here ... I suppose that's because Mother's gone ... I'd like to reach her somehow ... no one knows what happens after death ... even science doesn't ... there may be some kind of hereafter. (472)

Faced with the reality of death, Reuben comes to realize that science cannot offer him any sufficient explanation or solace for his loss. Instead, it creates a wild, anarchical, intellectual chaos of uncertainty in him. The supposition that science is proved true and the religious belief in Redemption after death turns out to be false, Reuben thinks, means that there is no chance or possibility for him to see his mother again; for him, death is merely the grim and ugly end of existence. In the absence of any redemptive hope, and of any logical explanation for death, Reuben feels that his pain is unbearably meaningless. In his desolation at learning his mother died of Pneumonia, his resentment of his father erupts:

Pneumonia, eh? Well, it's a damn wonder we didn't all die of it years ago, living in this damp! Ever since I can remember the cellar's leaked like a sieve. You never could afford to get it fixed right ... Every storm the water'd begin to drip down and Mother'd put the wash basin on the floor to catch it! It was always damp in this house. (465)

For Reuben, whose personality has changed from a naive obedient son of a minister into a cynical materialist, poverty is no longer considered to be a virtue or a blessing. On the contrary, it is, Reuben sees, nothing but humiliating misfortune and disgrace. While the Reverend Light perseveres in trying to keep his lofty religious ideals, he fails to take care of the material needs of his family. Consequently, his religious rigidity has brought, Reuben thinks, nothing but shameful poverty, which leads to



his mother's death. Although Reuben turns all the blame on to his father, he knows that he is equally responsible for his mother's death; his own departure from home left her with a broken heart that never mended. An acute sense of guilt, like a worm, gnaws at his inner self. Under the torture of a remorseful conscience, he tries to pray at his mother's tomb. However, he suddenly realizes that the act of prayer is simply absurd and contradictory to his atheistic conviction:

Reuben: Ada – speaking of praying. I was out at Mother's grave. Before I thought, I started to do a prayer act – and then suddenly it hits me that there was nothing to pray to. (470)

As for his involuntary attempt to pray, he *scrambles to his feet- angry at himself*, talking to himself: "You damn fool! ... what's come over you, anyway? ... what are you praying to? ... when there is nothing." (472) Reuben's momentary expectation of a divine force, which may respond to his prayer, makes him feel embarrassed and foolish, as it betrays his belief in the 'death of God'. Yet, when he finds himself exposed to an immediate sense of nothingness, he feels terrifyingly alone, and empty both emotionally and metaphysically. As much as Reuben used to be terrified at the name of God-Father, the very idea of God's absence equally distresses him. This existential anguish cannot be relieved by his new science. Here, Reuben's tormenting dilemma ultimately addresses the crucial question: what is truth? As I note earlier, the term "truth" in this drama is used with two different connotations; one is a spiritual/religious belief, and the other is an empirical/secular knowledge. The former is implied in the name of Reuben's father, Light, whereas the latter is represented by electricity, Dynamo. The modern scientific 'truth' clashes with the religious notion of 'truth.' Exhausted by this tormenting conflict between the Old and the New, in other words, his father's religious fundamentalism, and a modern scientific atheism,

Reuben finally denounces his ardent quest for truth by saying: “I don’t want any miracle, Mother! I don’t want to know the truth!”(488) Reuben’s definite denial of all truth – whether religious or scientific – reflects a deep seated scepticism of modernity. The sceptic culture of today, as this drama shows, favours the subjectivity of truth over the objective truth. This allows the individual to have his/her own intellectual freedom to define what is true. On the other hand, it also creates a serious ethical confusion, as depicted in the drama.

Reuben is obsessed with the Puritan concept of sin and atonement. The weight of guilt presses down on Reuben, leading him astray to the point of self-destruction. When the lightning flashes with a tremendous sound, Reuben starts trembling with fear, and cries: “I am scared, Mother! I’m guilty! I’m damned!” (446) Reuben’s fear for guilt and punishment is created by his father Reverend Light. By radicalizing the Old Testament, Light imposes on Reuben the idea that God, as moral ruler of the world, is a merciless judge; no one who offends Him can escape from His punishment. This punitive and avenging God projects an alter ego of Reuben’s father, who is stubborn and unwilling to negotiate, rigidly strict, and irrationally tempestuous. Subsequently, Reuben identifies God as a threatening patriarch. In order to free himself from the yoke of enslavement to the tyrannical sovereignty of the God- Father, Reuben walks away from home, and climbs up:

the top of Long Hill. That’s where I was all during the storm that night after I left here ... I made myself stand there to watch the lightning. After that storm was over I’d changed, believe me! I knew nothing could ever scare me again-and a whole lot of me was dead and a new lot started living. (460)

The summit of the hill, where Reuben stands alone, is redolent with a significant Christian meaning. In his book *A New Song For the Lord*, Pope Benedict XVI introduces two different kinds of mountain in the New Testament: “the mountain of

temptation” and “the mountain of mission.” The former refers to the one in the Matthew’s Gospel 4:8-9:

Next, taking him to a very high mountain, the devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. And he said to him, ‘I will give you all, if you fall at my feet and do me homage’.

In opposition to the high mountain where Jesus was tempted by Satan, Jesus of his own freewill stands on another mountain, where he was crucified. In this regard, Pope Benedict XVI explains:

Previously the devil had placed him on the pinnacle of the temple and on the top of the mountain, but now he is really “at the very top,” raised “on high”; this height, however, is the exact opposite of Satan’s height. Satan’s heights are the heights of doing things on one’s own authority, of uninhibitedly determining oneself in possessing all things and being permitted all things ...The height of the mountain of crucifixion consists in Jesus’ having relinquished all possession and privileges all the way down to the pure nothingness of complete nakedness. (50)

These two antithetical mountains in the biblical text, Pope Benedict XVI suggests, are concerned essentially with power; power to possess his autonomy in disobedience to God, and power to negate the self in obedience to God’s will. Applying this theological interpretation of mountain to O’Neill’s play, Reuben’s hill is closer to “the mountain of temptation” than “the mountain of mission”. Just as Jesus is offered by Satan “the splendour of power”, denoting unlimited freedom to do what he wants, Reuben on top of the hill asserts his absolute autonomy of freedom, by rejecting his father’s power over his life. In doing so, Reuben makes himself like a god.

Concerning mountain scenes in the Bible, another theological interpretation is suggested by Terence L. Donaldson. In his book, *Jesus on the mountain*, Donaldson, examines the theological significance of the mountain related scenes of both the Old and the New Testaments. In the Old Testament, Donaldson reads the

mountain scenes in relation to Judaism, and then classifies them into three groups; covenant, cosmic/eschatological, and Revelation. The mountain in the Old Testament is considered to be a sacred place where God, Yahweh, reveals himself to the faithful like Abraham, Moses, or Job, and makes His covenant with the Israelites. Within the Gospel of St. Matthew, Donaldson explores the mountains, where Jesus conducted his missionary work, teaching, feeding, and healing the people. Donaldson goes on to examine the importance of the mountain of Temptation, and the mountain of Olive, and the mountain of Transfiguration. While the mountains of the Old Testament essentially designate God's Revelation, by Matthew's time, they have become significant as places where Jesus fulfils his Sonship through obedience to God's Will. This development suggests that God's covenant with his people, as illustrated in the Old Testament, has been fully completed. In contrast to these biblical mountains, denoting reconciliation, unification, the revelation of God, and obedience based on love, Reuben's mountain implies isolation, the absence of God, disobedience, and resistance grounded upon contempt and hate. Within a biblical interpretation, Reuben's climbing up to the mountain is seen as his ascending to the meeting point with God. Reaching "a point of entry into the heavenly sphere" (Donaldson 82), Reuben, with much resentment and anger, dares to confront God in the form of lightning, and then disowns his sonship to the 'Light,' which denotes both his father, and the Christian God. In his defiance, and resistance to his father, Light, and the 'light' of God, Reuben finds himself in the darkness of night. Interestingly, this night scene makes a stark contrast to the mountain of Transfiguration in the Bible:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There in their presence he was transfigured: his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as dazzling as light. (Matthew 17:1-2)

While Jesus Christ, in his submission to His Father, is transfigured, and filled with a bright whiteness of light, Reuben, in his opposition to God, is surrounded by the darkness of night. In fact, Reuben's rebellion against his father and God cannot be considered to be a horrible crime by itself. He simply tries to be a master of himself, independent and free from their oppressive power. Standing alone on the peak, Reuben imagines himself to be like a god with the sole and ultimate control over his own destiny. Severing his previous dependence on his father and his religion, Reuben makes a resolution to direct his life according to his own free will. However, Reuben's journey to explore this new liberal and autonomous life is destined to be incredibly rough, as the stormy night suggests.

In throwing off the yoke of Puritan morality, Reuben allows himself to enjoy an unchecked sexual impulse. In Act 2, after sexual intercourse with Ada, Reuben *coldly* said to her: "what we did was just plain sex – an act of nature – and that's all there is to it ... what people call love is just sex- and there is no sin about it." (469) To Reuben, whose personality has changed into that of an extreme materialist, Ada is not a person, but an object that he can exploit to satisfy his selfish gratification of the flesh. Accordingly, Reuben claims that there is no sacramental significance in sex, and so it is not sinful. Although he appears to be successfully liberated from his father's Puritan influence, he incessantly falls back into it. In Act 3, Reuben reverses his previous consideration of sex as a mere biological act, and confesses his afflicting sense of guilt to his imaginary god, Dynamo:

I was living in sin – that Dynamo would never find me worthy of her secret until I'd given up the flesh and purified myself! ... Ada keeps coming in dreams ... her body ... I've beaten myself with my belt. (478)

Reuben, in forsaking his Puritan heritage, is supposed to be free from its moral judgement; yet, he cannot escape from the terrifying feeling of being alone with his own troubled conscience. This is a moment of tragedy, as Jennifer Wallace writes in her book, *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* :

Tragedy is unaffected by fate, is either, as Kierkegaard points out, to leave the tragic character frighteningly alone, and guided only by his own judgement, or to abandon him to the mercy of the purely arbitrary and accidental. (137)

Reuben is no longer affected by his God, who is believed to be the supreme judge of morality. Instead, Reuben punishes himself, as harshly as his Calvinist father. He beats himself with his belt, until he feels that his body is completely purified of sinful lust. Yet, no matter what, he still feels perpetually chained to the bondage of his sin. Unable to free himself from his self-imposed sense of guilt, he, in his self-condemnation, afflicts himself until death.

In *Dynamo*, it is clear that the conflict between religion and science presents significant intellectual and ethical issues. However, most importantly, O'Neill's drama is concerned with the man's relationship with God, as O'Neill declares:

most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God. (qtd. in Gray 208)

From O'Neill's statement, it can be inferred that he conceives humanity as primarily spiritual beings, capable of relating themselves to God. In Reuben's case, he relates himself to God through his own father. Unfortunately, Reuben's relationship with his father is based on fear and terror, rather than filial love. The fear makes him like a slave to his father. This master/slave relationship informs Reuben's picture of God as a hostile opposition. In resistance to God, whose fatherly image carries all the negative connotations associated with masculinity, Reuben invents a feminine deity –

Mother Nature. In the opening of Act 3, where Reuben stares at a dynamo that is turned by the massive power of the sea, he, “with a sudden renewal of his unnatural excitement” shouts:

we’ve got the sea in our blood still ! It’s what makes our hearts live! And it’s sea rising up in clouds, falling on the earth in rain, made that river that drives turbines that drive Dynamo! The sea makes her heart beat, too! ... And think of the stars! Driving through space, round and round, just like the electrons in the atom! But there must be a center around which all moves ... And that center must be the Great Mother of Eternal Life, Electricity, and Dynamo is her Divine Image on earth! (477)

Reuben, in his frantic fascination, claims that “the Great Mother of Eternal Life” stands at the “centre” of the universe, and Mother Nature is incarnated in the form of the electric machine. Reuben imagines that his new goddess, unlike the jealous, egoistic, and wrathful God -Father, is gentle, loving, and comforting to her children. In contrast to his illusion, however, Reuben’s maternal goddess of Nature turns out to be as unmanageably destructive as the old patriarchal God: “The air full of sound, a soft overtone of rushing water from the dam, and the river bed below, penetrated dominantly by the harsh, throaty, metallic purr of the dynamo.” (473) As implied by the depth of the seawater, Reuben is overpowered by the enormous force of nature, which is unpredictable, unfathomable and dangerous. Its unintelligent and arbitrary power is enriched with a mixture of high-pitched mechanical sounds, and the wild clamour from the falling water. This expressive theatrical effect creates a shocking and thrilling diabolical climate on stage. Enraptured by the dark sensation of terror, Reuben abandons himself to a wild and sacrilegious madness, imagining a dynamo as if:

it’s like a great dark idol ... like the old stone statues of gods people prayed to ... only it’s living and they were dead ... the part on top is like a head ... with eyes that see you without seeing you ... and below it is like a body ... not a man’s ... round like a woman’s ... as if it had breasts ... that’s what the dynamo is! ... what

life is! (474)

Reuben's idolatrous worship of the metallic machine signifies more than a perverse act of blasphemy. It reflects an excessively pious characteristic. His deeper nature shows that he is overemotional, passionate and fervently dedicated to what he believes in; he could never be a cold-minded intellectual atheist. Accordingly, his obsessive attachment to science and machinery leads him to an extreme fanaticism. As for Reuben's fanatical devotion to his newly found deity, the dynamo, Light condemns him by saying: "you sold your soul to Satan." (467) No longer being affected by his father's preaching of evil or eternal damnation, Reuben gets *immediately resentful* and answers *with his cold smile*: "your Satan is dead. We electrocuted him along with God." (467) Ironically, it is precisely when Reuben thinks that he is no longer horrified by any eschatological imagery of Satan in the Gospel, another frightful reality begins to emerge before his eyes in the concrete form of machinery. When God in heaven is dead to Reuben, the gods of the hydro-electric plant are descending to Earth with the most hideous and terrifying appearance, as described in the following scene:

when the light comes on again the interiors of the upper and lower switch galleries are revealed ... the oil switches, with their spindly steel legs, their square, crisscrossed steel bodies( the containers inside looking like bellies), their sick cupped arms stretching upward, seem like queer Hindu idols tortured into scientific supplications. (483)

This merging of the hideously overgrown electrical equipment, and the eerie imagery of Hindu idols creates the apocalyptical illusion of perverse finale. This scene shows how a purely scientific mechanical world can be merged into the irrational sphere of the supernatural.

This play closes with *Reuben's voice* [which] *rises in a moan that is a*



*mingling of pain and loving consummation, and this cry dies into a sound that is like the crooning of a baby.*(488) Here, Reuben's primal cry echoes his father's prophecy: the eternal condemnation of the God of righteous wrath. From his father's Calvinistic perspective, Reuben, as a consequence of his denial of God, and worship of a false idol, is damned, ruined and destroyed. On the other hand, when it is considered that his moaning gradually changes "*into a sound that is like the crooning of a baby*" (448), the ending seems to imply Reuben's redemption from his fallen self. Reuben is afflicted and despairing, but he is purged, purified, and reborn as an innocent baby. The ambiguous conclusion leaves us questioning as Travis Board suggests: "The confusion was fatal and the play ends in an unresolved suspension: does Reuben find God? or does his death demonstrate "the general spiritual futility of the substitute-God search?" (321) As for those questions, the drama suggests no clear answer to the audience.

To sum up, the main conflict of this drama is the struggle between the impossibility of destroying the old God, and the difficulties of finding its substitute in a materialistic world. Reuben's inability to choose either God or science leads him to despair. This is what O'Neill means by "the sickness of today." In his letter to George Jan Nathan, 1929, he writes:

it [*Dynamo*] is really the first play of a trilogy that will dig at the roots of *the sickness of today* as I feel it – the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialistic to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort his fears of death. (qtd. in Nathan 119)

In the 'death of old God', O'Neill remarks, science and materialism fail to satisfy a metaphysical need for a meaning for life, and solace from the terror of death. "The sickness of today" is delivered in *Dynamo*.

O'Neill's protagonists, Reuben and Yank, suffer from an intellectual malaise. Yank is intellectually deprived, unable to think rationally, whereas Reuben is intellectually overcharged, lost in too many disordered chaotic ideas: his intellectual activity becomes a demonic addiction. What really needs to be considered, however, is the malaise in their heart, rather than in their mind. O'Neill's drama is concerned with heart and emotion rather than intellect and reason. The hearts of both Yank and Reuben are sick because they cannot find any peace within their divided selfhood. They desperately need to be understood, consoled and secured in both a social and spiritual sense, but lacking any inner resource, they plunge into inexorable destruction. Through these individual characters, O'Neill's work demonstrates the illness of society with the 'death of God'. In this sense, the concerns depicted in *Dynamo*, and *The Hairy Ape*, are extended from the individual to a much wider scope, reflecting both O'Neill's time and even our own.

## 2. Theatrical Experiment; from realism to expressionism:

### *Beyond the Horizon and The Fountain*

I am always trying to do a big thing. It's only the job of that attempt that keeps me writing plays ... Shooting at a star may be hopeless in my case, time will tell, but it gives one a rich zest in being alive in oneself [sic] and putting up a battle about something or other. And so it is important to me, if to no one [sic]. (qtd. in Highsmith 18)

Like “shooting at a star” in his words, O’Neill’s vision of theatre is “beyond the horizon” of reality. In order to present on stage the “big thing”, O’Neill takes a theatrical adventure by stepping into the beautiful custom of a mythic world. His theatre challenges the possibility of bringing religious experience on stage, after “the death of God.” In this connection of the Nietzschean theory of art, this paper will examine O’Neill’s theatrical experiment, shifting from realism to aesthetic expressionism.

In a letter to Robert F. Sisk, October 15.1933, O’Neill said: “I write first about life and then try to cram it into a play form.” How to interpret life and represent it in the form of art was the biggest concern for Eugene O’Neill. In January 1914, when the ambitious young artist, O’Neill asked Calyton Hamilton for some advice in writing a one-act play, Calyton Hamilton replied: “keep your eye on life-on life as you have seen it; and to hell with the rest.” (qtd. in Bogard 15) Following Hamilton’s advice, O’Neill employed a realistic style in his earlier drama: “critics took realism to be O’Neill’s predominant mode in his early years.” (Highsmith 19) Becoming a more mature artist in the 1920’s, O’Neill is no longer content with the realistic representation of life on stage. In his tribute to Strindberg in 1923, O’Neill

wrote: “we have endured too much from the banality of surfaces.” (qtd. in Highsmith 18) Realism’s anatomical fidelity to the accuracy of life never fully satisfies O’Neill, as he, with succinctness, denounces realism: “Damn that word, ‘realism!’” (Ibid)

O’Neill’s departure from realism is prompted by his artistic urge to express “a deeper, inner secret” of life as Daniel Cawthon wrote in “Eugene O’Neill: progenitor of a new religious drama.” Interestingly Cawthon compares Eugene O’Neill’s vocation as an artist with the priesthood:

As preceptor of the ‘inner secret’, O’Neill takes on the mantle of the priesthood. Behind the life ... he secret grasps the heart of the beholder and urges him on towards articulation. (24-5)

Just as the religious person’s mind wanders through eternity – the invisible world of the spirit, O’Neill’s poetic heart never rests on the empirical world, but is constantly struggling to articulate something immaterial and transcendental. In *Beyond the Horizon*, for example, O’Neill expresses his passionate yearning for what is sacred and beautiful beyond the visible world:

Robert: (*Pointing to the horizon-dreamily*) supposing I was to tell you that it’s just Beauty that’s calling me. the beauty of the far off and unknown, the mystery and spell of the East which lures me in the books I’ve read, the need of the freedom of the great wide spaces, the joy of wandering on and on – in quest of the secret which is hidden over there, beyond the horizon? (85)

This play opens with the scene where Robert is about to embark on his ambitious journey in search of ‘the beauty of the far off’. Robert, enchanted by the dangerous beauty of the sea, dreams of becoming lord of the ocean, but he soon finds that life is not as idealistic as he imagined. The night before his departure, he changes his mind, and decides to remain on the farm. In favour of his carnal love for Ruth, Robert abandons his ambitious adventure of sailing the far-off seas. His father, unhappy with his son’s decision, reproachfully says: “ You running’ against your own nature, and

you're goin' to be a' mighty sorry for it if you do.'"(106) The father's furious prophecy comes true in the following two acts of the play. As a consequence of 'running against' his own nature – having an academic tendency, and a sickly body – Robert hopelessly fails in maintaining the farm in spite of his every endeavour. This causes his family to suffer gravely from poverty. Moreover, his wife, Ruth, actually turns out to be in love with his brother Andrew. Robert's suffering is further aggravated by the death of his two-year old daughter, and his own tuberculosis:

Robert: these years have been terrible for both of us. (*His voice is lowered to a trembling whisper*) Especially the last eight months since Mary-died. (*He forces back a sob with a convulsive shudder – then breaks out in a passionate agony*) Our last hope of happiness! I could curse God from the bottom of my soul- if there was a God! (*He is racked by a violent fit of coughing and hurriedly puts his handkerchief to his lips*). (147-8)

Cursing God, he expresses his anger for successive misfortunes, which eventually lead to irredeemable loss. Once he made a mistaken decision, he has to pay price to the bitter end. The suffering that he has to endure seems to be overwhelming in comparison to the mistake that he made in his ignorance. This acute sense of injustice makes the drama tragic. On the other hand, this play also can be seen as a romantic melodrama. The protagonist is a self-absorbed dreamer, chasing after something impossible, and at the end, he realizes that his whole life is nothing but a pointless waste:

Robert: My God, what am I boasting of ?  
Debts of this one and that, taxes, interest unpaid! I'm a fool!  
(*He lies back in his chair closing his eyes for a moment, then speaks in a low voice*). I'll be frank, Ruth. I've been an utter failure and I've dragged you with me. I couldn't blame you in all justice-for hating me. (148)

His poetic nature makes Robert overly sensitive, with a tender mind and a wistful imagination. Consequently, he finds it difficult to cope with the woeful reality that

destroys his hopes and dreams of happiness. He feels desolate and useless. Out of his excruciating frustration with the shameful present, he becomes obsessed with “the beauty of the far off,” shielding his wounded selfhood in a dream. In the midst of a dreadful suspension between his miserable reality and this beautiful dream, Robert desperately seeks for a sort of heavenly beauty, hoping that it may offer solace to his wounded soul. In waiting for the sunrise, Robert greatly wishes to witness the glorious beauty of nature:

Robert: Listen. All our suffering has been a test through which we had to pass to prove ourselves worthy of a finer realization (*Exultingly*) And we did pass through it! It hasn't broken us! And now the dream is to come true! Don't you see? Ruth (*looking at him with frightened eyes as if she thought he had gone mad.*) Yes, Rob, I see; but won't you go back to bed now and rest?  
Robert: No. I am going to see the sun rise. It's an augury of good fortune...  
No sun yet, It isn't time. All I can see is the black rim of the damned hills outlined against a creeping grayness. (151)

In terms of language, and theatrical presentation, it is realistic, and in this realistic realm, the protagonist's unrealistic dream of beauty beyond the horizon cannot be fulfilled. The passionate request for transcendental beauty, however, is once more challenged in the following play, *The Fountain*. This drama is inspired by a mythic story, as O'Neill testifies in its programme note:

The idea of writing *The Fountain* came originally from my interest in the recurrence in folk-lore of the beautiful legend of a healing spring of eternal youth. The play is only incidentally concerned with the Era of Discovery in America. It has sought merely to express the urging spirit of the period without pretending to any too-educational accuracy in the matter of dates and facts in general. The characters, with the exception of Columbus, are fictitious. (qtd. in Bogard 234)

By adapting the folk-legend to the play, O'Neill announces his definite separation from realism: “I wish to take solemn oath right here and now, that *The Fountain* is not morbid realism.” (qtd. in Bogard 233-4) This divorce from realism gives O'Neill an artistic freedom to explore his wildest passion and imagination, concerning

metaphysical issues like the immortality of body and the soul. According to the legend, it is believed that there is “a fountain – a spring in which old men bathe or drink and become young warriors again.” (*Fountain* 400) Based on this myth, O’Neill creates a character, called Juan Ponce de Leon. O’Neill describes this central character as :

Juan Ponce de Leon, in so far as I have been able to make him a human being is wholly imaginary. I have simply filled in the bare outline of his career, as briefly reported in the Who’s Who of the histories, with a conception of what could have been the truth behind his ‘life-sketch’ if he had been the man it was *romantically and religiously-moving* [emphasis added] to me to believe he might have been! (qtd. in Bogard 233-4)

In O’Neill’s depiction, Juan is romantic, religious, and moving. Casting himself under the spell of the mythical beauty of the fountain that lies beyond the material world, Juan desires to acquire eternal youth by immersing himself in the legendary fountain. He dreams of:

some far country of the East-Cathay, Cipango ... Beauty resides there and is articulate. Each sound is music, and every sight a vision. The trees bear golden fruit. And in the centre of the grove, there is a fountain – beautiful beyond human dreams, in whose rainbows all of life is mirrored. In that fountain’s waters, young maidens play and sing and tend it everlastingly for very joy in being one with it. This is the Fountain of Youth. (*Fountain* 386-7)

The protagonist longs for a harmonious ethereal world, deeply permeated by primitive innocence and blissful beauty of spirit. Referring to this narration, Bogard notes: “the image of the old harmony, born of sacred, primordial peace is a vision of Eden, of Paradise.” (237) Yearning for something distant and unattainable, Juan is a romantic dreamer, or idealist, just like Robert in *Beyond the Horizon*. Although both of them harbour a sort of utopian fantasy, they are not entirely identical. In searching for the vague and mystic beauty, Robert considers it an idle day-dream, whereas Juan cherishes it as if it is a kind of religious conviction which shapes the destiny of his

life. This faith gives Juan the strength to pursue his ideal to the end, whereas Robert lets his dream vanish like a mirage. Robert, having a weak and fragile spirit, does not actually believe in his dream, whereas Juan, full of passion, has a strong belief in what he is hoping for. Juan's faith has a religious quality as it pursues something supernatural and spiritual. As O'Neill himself describes above, he invests the character Juan with a strong sense of spirituality. Juan is yearning for what is unchangeable, imperishable and immutable; immortality of life. This desire, in the beginning, is prompted by his dissatisfaction with his withered old flesh in stark contrast to the beauty of the young girl he passionately adores. His fanatical obsession with the freshness of youth, however, develops into a higher pursuit of something spiritual beyond the corporal. Initially, Juan's journey in search of the miraculous fountain is prompted by his fear of the body's natural process of decay. As the journey advances, he realizes what he has been looking for is in fact a blissful beauty of the soul rather than of the body. The youthfulness that Juan desperately desires to have is not just a physical one. In a deeper sense, he craves a spiritual rebirth by purifying his sinful past and lustful mortal body. In order to redeem his corrupted selfhood through the spiritual purification, Juan strenuously labours to the last. Upon his final confrontation with the power of destiny itself, he cries:

Oh, Luis, I begin to know eternal youth! I have found my Fountain! O Fountain of Eternity, take back this drop, my soul! (*he dies, Luis bows his head and weeps.*) (448)

The drama itself may sound unconvincingly melodramatic, wallowing in nostalgia. It, however, conveys a significant Christian theological implication. Although the story is inspired by folk legend, the fountain in the play resembles the holy stream in the Bible:



Wherever the river flows, all living creatures teeming in it will live. Fish will be very plentiful, for wherever the water goes it brings health. (Ezekiel 47:9)

Like the holy water in the Scripture, the fountain in O'Neill's drama is believed to bring new life to the person who immerses oneself in it, as its name, "the Spring of Life" signifies. (*Fountain* 400) To wash one's body in the water is both ritualistic and symbolic; it signifies both a cleansing and a new birth. As if undergoing baptism, Juan, by immersing himself in the miraculous water, wishes to purify his soul from the corruption of his carnal sin, and so obtain a spiritual re-birth, which ultimately serves to gain for him eternal life. In this regard, Juan is religious, having a faith in redemption and immortality. Juan's uncompromising commitment for his belief, and his passion and strength in maintaining his conviction to the very end of his life, make the character "*romantically – and religiously – moving*" in O'Neill's words. On the other hand, Juan's monomaniacal pursuit of what is seemingly impossible – immortality of the soul – can be seen as being simply self-destructive, foolish and ridiculous, rather than moving, especially for the present day audience who are sceptical about the power of myth and the supernatural. Moreover, Juan's gaze at the utopian world puts the drama in danger of descending into mere sentimental romanticism. This risk is clearly recognized by O'Neill himself in *The Fountain*: "perhaps by living in the past you will consecrate her future to fanaticism." (394) Despite this awareness that his drama can be degraded into an empty fantasy, O'Neill deliberately makes his protagonist a romantic hero. As a reason for this, he explains:

The people who succeed and do not push on to a greater failure are the spiritual middle classers. Their stopping at success is the proof of their compromising insignificance. How petty their dreams must have been! The man who pursues the mere attainable should be sentenced to get it – and keep it. Let him rest on his

laurels and enthrone him in a Morris chair, in which laurels and hero may wither away together. Only through the unattainable does man achieve a hope worth living and dying for – and so attain himself. He with the spiritual guerdon of a hope in hopelessness is nearest to the stars and the rainbow's foot ... One must state one's religion first in order not to be misunderstood, even if one makes no rash boast of always having the strength to live up to it. (qtd. in Bigsby 52)

Out of his abhorrence for “the spiritual middle classers,” who are merely content with their material success, but are in want of spirit and faith, O'Neill intentionally creates a wildly imaginative and tragic character in Juan, a man who dares to take challenge of “the unobtainable,” even at the risk of losing everything. Through this uncompromisingly passionate and spiritual character, O'Neill wishes to show the nobility of the human spirit. Juan exhibits enormous strength to endure the monstrous fear and pain of the darkness of doubt, and, at the end, he courageously lets his mortal self go in pursuit of a grander existence- the eternal life. Reflecting this tragic sentimentality, Cawthon writes: “He [Eugene O'Neill] descends into the darkness of his soul, in hopes of discovering both the experience of and image of transcendence.” (22) Through severe sufferings and afflictions in body and soul, Juan undergoes a spiritual transformation, and surpasses the limit of his mortality at the end. This powerfully tragic hero, O'Neill expects, profoundly moves his audience's heart. In pursuing a romantic heroism over a realistic cynicism, O'Neill moves further away from realism. As for this, he writes:

The theatre should be a refuge from the facts of life which we all feel, if we do not think, had nothing to do with the truth. Not refuge in the sense of a narcotic, a forgetting, but in the sense of an inspiration that lifts us on a plane beyond ourselves, as we know them (realism), drives us deep into the unknown within and behind ourselves. The theatre should stand as apart from existence as the church did in the days when it was the church. It should give us what the church no longer gives us – a meaning. In brief, it should return to the spirit of Greek grandeur. And if we have no Gods, or heroes to portray, we have the subconscious, the mother of all gods and heroes. But for this realism is insufficient. (qtd. in Martin 128)

Knowing that realism is inadequate to express what is essential in life – a spiritual truth – O'Neill turns his back on realism, and instead finds his inspiration in the art of Ancient Greece, expanding his imaginative scope with the gods and heroes of antiquity. O'Neill's departure from realism/naturalism, and his increased interest in Hellenic culture, can also be traced to the influence of Nietzsche.

### **3. Aesthetic Tragedy; O'Neill and Nietzsche; Redemption through Art: *Lazarus Laughed***

In the second decade of the twentieth century when Nietzsche's work began to be translated into English, he attracted many young intellectuals in America. 'Neill was one of them. Nietzsche's influence on O'Neill is significant, especially during the period when O'Neill engages himself with the Provincetown Players. The group's leader, George Cram Cook expresses his enthusiasm for Nietzsche's work:

The spiritual passion of Nietzsche's writing is too keen, too intense, to be readily endured in those times when life keys one's own nerves high. It is precisely to our times of dullness that Nietzsche offers the sting of his perpetual pain and joy. He is a creator of the creative mood. (qtd. in Bogard 70)

As much as Cook, O'Neill was also fascinated by Nietzsche's idea of art. During the rehearsal of *The Great God Brown* at the Greenwich Village Theatre, O'Neill was seen to carry a worn book of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in his pocket.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche expresses his philosophical concern for art in relation to life, nature and culture. Art, Nietzsche claims, makes life endurable, and meaningful; through art, he says, "life is made both possible and worth living." (16) Nietzsche's creed of the life-saving power of art entails his rejection of the reality of life as it is. According to the Dionysian truth, Nietzsche conceives, life is unbearably tedious, painful, terrifying, and meaningless. This Dionysian wisdom corresponds to Silenus' wisdom that 'not to be born is best of all' and 'the second best for you is to die soon.' The only way to tolerate the intolerable life, Nietzsche claims, is to transform Dionysian reality into dreamlike images through the artistic means of Apollo. The Nietzschean creed of the aesthetic power of art encourages O'Neill's ambition to lift his contemporary theatre into a higher form of art, restoring its spiritual roots. As Nietzsche does, O'Neill also believes that art has a power to

transform life, and the reality that is re-created in a form of theatre is beautiful and significant. Nietzsche's influence on O'Neill is clearly manifested in his mythic drama, *Lazarus Laughed*. In connection with Nietzsche's aestheticism, three major ritualistic values of drama can be applied to this play: (i) drama is to celebrate a life of community; (ii) drama is to evoke a passionate intensity of life; (iii) drama is to affirm faith in life.

**(i) *Drama is to celebrate a life of community:***

O'Neill wishes that his audience, like the ecclesial congregation, feel unified with one another by sharing theatrical experience. The experience of taking part in religious ceremonies is powerful as it generates a sense of oneness among the worshippers through their dedication and commitment. A similar experience can be expected from theatre as Norman A. Bert addresses:

Like religion, theatre is practised in a community for a community... those who do attend come out of the larger community, bring with them a consciousness of the larger community, and return to the larger community where, subtly or overtly, they share the effect of their participation in the cultic event. (5)

Coming together to worship, recite prayers, and sing sacred songs, or sometimes dance together, those in the religious rite experience a strong bond to each other. The sense of community is central to almost all religious liturgies. Like religion, drama in its character, O'Neill considers, is essentially communal rather than individual. In order to create such a powerful ecclesial effect – a sense of belonging, and of unity –, O'Neill has to leave behind naturalism and realism. Instead, he turns his eyes to the ancient world of Greek drama, just as George Cram Cook asserts:

one man cannot produce drama. True drama is born only of one feeling animating all the members of a *clan-spirit* [emphasis added] shared by all and expressed by the few for the all. If there is nothing to take the place of the

common religious purpose and passion of the primitive group out of which the Dionysian dance was born, no new vital drama can arise in any people. (qtd. in Bogard 68)

In this parallel of theatre with religion, here, Cook suggests the importance of the “clan-spirit.” Like the primitive religious group, Cook claims, it is essential to have a kind of strong kinship among all the members in theatre. Following Cook’s admiration for Hellenic culture, his associate on the board of the Provincetown Players, Edna Kenton said:

Back to Greece! – that was Jig’s [Cook’s] solution for every modern ill. Back, rather, to the spirit of Greece for its lesson, and then a return to re-*evoke the group spirit* [highlight added] from modern life. (qtd. in Bogard 69)

As Kenton relates, it is the ‘group spirit’ that Cook wishes to revitalize in a modern theatre. The resuscitation of the Grecian collective spirit, Cook believes, heals “every modern ill.” Both Kenton and Cook, here, assume that the sickness of modern times finds its primary cause in individualistic culture, just as Nietzsche once condemned individualism as “the primal source of evil.”(52) As a reaction to this, O’Neill, with the support of his Provincetown companions, attempts to realize his ideal theatre as a communal celebration through the rebirth of the ancient Greek tradition of drama. In order to create a primitive collective spirit, he designs his play, similar to a Greek cult.

This drama finds its motive in the Biblical story: Lazarus’ resurrection from death. (John:2) Despite its Biblical subject matter, Christianity plays a minor role in the play. This play, in its style and content, is closer to being Dionysian rather than Christian. *Lazarus Laughed* opens with “the chorus of old men” in a *quavering rising and falling chant-their arms outstretched toward Lazarus*:

Jesus Wept!  
Behold how he loved him!  
He that believeth,  
Shall never die!  
...  
Lazarus, come forth! (275)

The opening sentence of the drama, “Jesus wept” is directly extracted from the Bible. (John 11:35) Jesus cried when he found out that his friend, Lazarus, had died. Jesus’ tears manifest his compassionate heart. On the contrary, O’Neill’s god, Lazarus, represents an unfeeling geometry of the universe, cruelly indifferent to those who suffer. As if mocking Jesus’ cry in the Bible, Lazarus in O’Neill’s play laughs in a demonic way. The primary subject of the celebration in the play is neither the Christian God nor Christ, but it is Dionysius. The leading character, Lazarus is clearly identified with the immortal Greek god, Dionysius, as he is:

dressed in a tunic of white and gold, his bronzed face and limbs radiant in the halo of his own glowing light ... His countenance now might well be that of the positive masculine Dionysus, closest to the soil of the Grecian gods, a Son of Man, born of a mortal. (307)

Possessed by Dionysian spirit, Lazarus

turns, throwing back his head and stretching up his arms, and begins to laugh low and tenderly, like caressing music at first but gradually gaining in volume, becoming more and more intense, and insistent, finally ending up on a triumphant, blood-stirring call to that ultimate attainment in which all prepossession with self is lost in an ecstatic affirmation of Life. (318)

As depicted, Lazarus’ ecstatic experience obviously appears to be Dionysian. Lazarus, intoxicated with the ‘wine of life’, buries himself in a heavy sleep, losing consciousness. The Dionysian intoxication is intensified by highly expressive Grecian art devices like masks, dance, movement, and music. This morbid ecstasy is then joined by the large masked crowd who:

begin to weave in and out, clasping each other’s hands now and then, moving mechanically in jerky steps to the music in a grotesque sort of marionettes’

country dance. At first this is slow but it momentarily becomes more hectic and peculiar. They raise clenched fists or hands distended into threatening talons. Their voices sound thick and harsh and animal-like with anger as they mutter and growl, each one aloud to himself or herself. (287)

The Satyr-like mob is certainly reminiscent of the drunken Dionysian chorus. The beastlike group sing and dance in an eccentric and atavistic way in indulgence of a strange pleasure of sensual gratification. Their provocative movement along with the exultant sound of music is intended to fill the entire theatre with an exhilaratingly sinister excitement. In this cultic exoticism, all individual differences are cancelled in madness and destruction. The forgetfulness of individuality eventually evokes a primitive collective consciousness. This corresponds to Nietzsche's idea of tragedy.

In *The Birth of tragedy*, he claims that tragedy as a Dionysian festival should offer "sense of a supreme artistic primal joy within the womb of the primal Oneness." (106) "The primal oneness" is, Nietzsche considers, the highest aesthetic experience that can be achieved by Dionysian art. Naming this as a "mystery doctrine of tragedy", Nietzsche adds:

the basic understanding of the unity of all things, individuation seen as the primal source of evil, art as the joyful hope that the spell of individuation can be broken, as a presentiment of a restored oneness. (52)

As implied here, Nietzsche strongly denounces individualism as the origin of all the evil. Ironically, his anti-individualistic point of view projects the fact that he himself is terrified of being himself, as Nietzsche writes: "for my heart refuses to believe that love is dead, cannot bear the terror of the loneliest loneliness: it compels me to talk, as though I were two." (qtd. in Brogan 155) The only way to cope with the fear that human beings are essentially alone after the death of God, Nietzsche believes, is to abandon one's conscious self in the Dionysian ecstasy. This thought is reflected in *Lazarus Laughed*. Lazarus, under the spell of Dionysian orgy, ejects his abnormally



eccentric laugh. His laughter, however, does not simply reflect his gay and cheerful mood. On the contrary, he laughs excessively in order to disguise the loneliness in his fear of death. Lazarus, unlike Christ, is resuscitated, rather than resurrected from death. This means that he is not yet completely free from death. He is simply enclosed in the fiction of the recurring pattern of the cosmic cycle. Despite his divine perfection in his illusion, however, he cannot overcome the fear of loneliness:

Lazarus: (*bending down-supplicatingly*) Miriam! Call back to me! Laugh! (He pauses. A second of dead silence, then, with a sound that is very like a sob, he kisses her on the lips) I am lonely! (347)

He mourns over his aloneness rather than Miriam's death. In this sense, he is egoistic. His laughter is as a way to be liberated from the horror of the narrow and constricted ego of isolation. This summons the Oriental cult of pantheism, which extinguishes one's empirical sense of existence, and offers a sense of oneness with everyone and everything in the universe. The liberating feeling of being part of a vast universe, O'Neill believes, can be accomplished by means of art, whose imagination makes it possible to overcome the horror of the individual by replacing it with the Dionysian collective spirit. This echoes Nietzsche's belief in the redemptive power of art. He claims that the illusion of art protects us from being overpowered by the fearful truth about the individual self. He says: "Dionysiac art ... forces us to look at the terrors of individual existence, yet we are not to be petrified with fear." (80) He believes that the Dionysiac art, which creates the dark aesthetic sensation of self-annihilation, helps us momentarily free ourselves from the misery of an individual's finite existence. Accordingly, Nietzsche asserts, the attic art serves to realize the Hellenic ideal of unification in community; art used to play a central part in the communal life of the Athenian. As it was in the Athenian public theatre, O'Neill also intends to

connect actor, chorus, and the public all together. In order to achieve this purpose, he employs the various independent classical theatrical devices such as masks, lighting, dancing, and music. He hopes that these expressive theatrical means work harmoniously so that they successfully serve to rejuvenate a Greek collective spirit. Nonetheless, as for the drama's ability to engage a modern audience, the critic's assessment is not quite as positive as Edwin A. Engel remarks:

O'Neill's interest in crowds was confined to the stage, remained psychological and theatrical; for he appeared to share Nathan's scorn for the 'popular, or mob, theatre', rather than Macgowan's optimistic democratic point of view. (74)

As Engel criticizes, it is doubtful that the viewers in the present time actually feel connected with those unhistorical figures on the stage. According to Paul Green's record of his conversation with O'Neill, however, he "hoped someday to write plays in which the audience could share as a congregation shares in the music and ritual of a church service." (qtd. in Bogard 285) As implied in his speech, O'Neil's idea of theatre as community is more spiritual or psychological, rather than social. Unlike a random social group, the public in the theatre are more than "a collection of separate persons who happened to be brought tighter by a common location and shared interest." (Durkheim 85) Theatre, O'Neill believes, has the power to create a collective sentimentality, binding the audience together both emotionally and psychosocially, just as a religious ceremony, like a Catholic communion service, aims at the communion of its congregation through spirituality.

**(ii) *Drama is to evoke a passionate intensity of life:***

O'Neill's mythic theatre, *Lazarus Laughed* also is expected to provoke violent emotions or titanic passions. The passion that is expressed in the play is both Aristotelian and Nietzschean. The protagonist's laughter elicits the Aristotelian

passions of terror and pity. In his triumph over death, the immortal Greek deity, Lazarus, is laughing, and singing with a chorus of followers:

Laugh! Laugh!  
There is only life!  
There is only laughter!  
Fear is no more!  
Death is dead! (310)

Destroying death is an act that exceeds the limits of human ability, indicating Lazarus' supernatural power. His divine sovereignty over life and death commands worship, enforcing a certain terror. The condemnation of death is considered a transgression of the law of nature, and this subsequently creates great chaos. As if Lazarus wishes to subvert what is ordered, he laughs violently; when Lazarus is "laughing harshly, discordantly and awkwardly," "terrific flashes of lightning and crashes of thundering sound intensify the horror of the laughing." (318) His wild earth-shaking laugh seriously disturbs one's serenity of mind or natural law, causing great confusion. This consequently generates fear and terror. As for the frightening power of laughter, the critic Giacomo Leopardi describes it:

just as if burst of artillery fire were heard nearby, where there were people in the dark. Everyone would be thrown into confusion, not knowing who might be hit if the artillery were loaded with shot. (54)

Just as people in the dark are horrified by the shot that might blindly strike them, those around Lazarus are struck with terror upon hearing his irrational outburst of laughter.

Lazarus' audacious laughter as he celebrates his victory in conquering death makes him superior to the rest of human characters who lament the misery of their own mortality. On the other hand, his laugh is not simply an expression of festive joy at his resuscitation, or of liberation from fear of death. Instead, it is closer to a wild

mourning, and an expression of despair. Lazarus feels despair in the pitiful human condition to be alone in the face of death, as expressed in the following speech: “tragic is the plight of the tragedian whose only audience is himself! Life is for each man a solitary cell whose walls are mirrors.” (309) This tragic sentiment, that the existential solitude of the human being is as inescapable as it is dreadful, arouses pity from the audience. His sorrowful heart, in fact, is secretly covered under the mask of carefree cheerfulness. Although he behaves as if he is an unfeeling deity, indifferent to human trifles, his heart is greatly disturbed by the death of his beloved. In contrast to the god-like excellence of his appearance, the character betrays his human weakness, afraid of being left alone. This makes us feel sorry for him. This sympathetic feeling, however, is not entirely identical with Aristotle’s notion of pity. Referring to the pitiful emotion, Aristotle explains that “all the things which we dread for ourselves excite our pity when they happen to others.” (*Rhetoric*, 2.8.13) Applying this to the case of Lazarus, it is hard to sympathize fully with the character. When other characters in the play mourn over death, he is undisturbed in heart and emotions. Instead, he wickedly laughs over those in mourning. Unlike other human characters, he is an immortal deity, free from the horror of death: he is not participating in the inexorable fate of humanity. His cold cynical and egoistic attitude, consequently, makes the audience feel alienated from the character.

As examined above, Lazarus’ laughter reflects both his divine supremacy, and human fragility simultaneously. As a result, this compound character creates both terror and pity/sympathy. However, they do not necessarily produce Aristotle’s emotional catharsis. According to Aristotle, tragedy makes the audience feel emotionally purified by freely relieving their innermost feeling of fear and pity

without any embarrassment. The emotional effect that is created in O'Neill's drama is closer to a Nietzschean than an Aristotelian sense, as it is sensual and destructive rather than purifying and healing. In the scene which describes Lazarus's ecstatic experience:

he[Lazarus] turns, throwing back his head and stretching up his arms, and begins to laugh low and tenderly, like caressing music at first but gradually gaining in volume, becoming more and more intense, and insistent, finally ending up on a triumphant, blood-stirring call to that ultimate attainment in which all prepossession with self is lost in an ecstatic affirmation of Life. (318)

As the protagonist gradually approaches his ecstatic climax, its tension is accelerated by the caressing music, filled with the excitement of the shocking and exhilarating Dionysian sensation. Sinking into the commotion of wild reveries and disordered fancies, Lazarus frantically shakes his whole body, and bursts into hysterical laughter. In presenting the ecstatic state, O'Neill uses spectacular artistic devices such as deformed facial masks, grotesque movement, and thrilling music. They are meant to appeal to our sense-perceptions on a different level, eliciting an intensely sensuous climate. This ultimately, O'Neill expects, serves to re-create a fascination for the occult, magic, and the supernatural. On the other hand, it is more appropriate to consider Lazarus's ecstasy as an unadulterated aesthetic event rather than as a religious one. The Dionysian ecstasy does not create an atmosphere of profound spirituality that presides over a solemn religious ceremony. Instead, it is heavily sensuous, hypnotic and hedonistic, rather than spiritual and contemplative. In this sense, the Dionysian frenzy where Lazarus indulges himself is closer to Nietzsche's notion of passion, rather than the Christian's.

Ecstasy in the Christian perspective does not merely rely on a sensuous occurrence as Dionysian liturgical practices do. In Christianity, it is believed that a

purified soul transcends 'beyond' the limitation of ephemeral sensuous experience so that a complete communion with the Highest Being is accomplished. The mystic exaltation follows after surrendering, purifying and unifying. This process is attentively depicted in another O'Neill's drama, *Days without End*. The protagonist, in his desperate need for higher necessity, turns to the church, and kneels before a life-size crucifix. At the very moment he completely casts himself upon the cross, he is overwhelmed by emotional upheaval. Then, wholeheartedly repentant of his sins – adultery and denouncing his faith – he experiences that his purified soul is elevated to the ethereal. He, in his mystic exaltation, sees the ecstatic vision of Christ whose face shines with the heavenly radiance of "the light of the dawn on the stained-glass windows swiftly rises [rising] to a brilliant intensity of crimson and green and gold." (*Days without End* 566) While this dramatic encounter with the Divinity is happening, he finds that his evil-self, Loving is dead on the floor, besides him. Then, the hero, "still in his ecstatic mystic vision" cries with joy: "I am John Loving." (566) His ego that was previously divided into John versus Love has now been restored to a whole, John Loving. This delivers an important theological insight. Through the mercy of God, John Loving's split selfhood is now healed, and unified in love. Accordingly he finds inner calm and peace. In contrast to this, Lazarus' ecstatic experience is depicted as a wild amoral madness like a cultic exorcism of evil. The sacrilegious passion is compounded by disordered reveries and fancies. This corresponds with Nietzsche's theory of aesthetic experience.

Based on German romanticism and an Hellenic type of hedonism, Nietzsche claims that one of the most essential functions of tragedy is to create:

The Apolline and Dionysiac excitement of the listener, in their tireless characterization of the hero's conflict with destiny, the victory of the moral world order or the discharging of emotions through tragedy is the essence of the tragic. (106)

The primal emotion that Nietzsche emphasizes as “the essence of the tragic” is dark, irrational, irresistible, and destructive in its nature. In this sense, the unbridled hedonistic passion in O'Neill's play is Nietzschean as much as it is Greek. The emotional force, O'Neill hopes, ultimately brings a spiritual uplift to those who suffer from the desolation of spirituality in the present time.

Interestingly, O'Neill identifies what is spiritual and religious with the sensuous and emotional. The notion of spirituality is equated with pure emotionalism. As for this, O'Neill's contemporary critic, Kenneth Macgowan in *The Theatre of Democracy*, writes:

The “spiritual elements” of theatre go back to the emotional roots of instinctive racial drama even while they build on to conscious study and interpretation of instinct and intuition and in general the whole vast field of the unconscious mind of man. (qtd. in Engel 73).

As implied above, it is assumed that the root of spirituality rests in something purely emotional. From this assumption, O'Neill also tries to make *Lazarus Laughed* something like an aboriginal rite with the expectation of evoking something emotionally uplifting and sensational, but not necessarily being intellectual. O'Neill's idea of tragic mythic theatre is anti-rationalistic. Concerning this, he notes: “reason has no business in the theatre anyway anymore than it has in a church. They are either below or above it.” (qtd. in Highsmith 18) O'Neill believes that what is important is beyond the external, and this can be perceived only by the heart. O'Neill's deep discontentment with scientific rationalism is explicitly expressed in his letter to de Casseres:

In Death of God. Long Live – What? with science supplying an answer which to religion-starved primitive instinct is like feeding a puppy biscuit to a lion, Or something like that. (qtd. in Bogard 321)

Prolonging the length of life with the help of scientific development can never satisfy O'Neill's artistic desire. Instead, he longs for something spiritual and transcendental, free from the confinement of corporeal and materialistic reality. From this thirst, he returns to the romantic tradition. Emphasizing the emotional element of his drama, O'Neill said:

The big universal meaning in back of the whole thing is sensed, emotionally felt, by a great many people, I believe, even if their intelligences fail to grasp it. (qtd. in Highsmith 20)

The "big universal meaning," O'Neill implies, cannot be conceived by a scientific positivism or natural reason. Instead, it can only be appreciated by the heart. What our own intellectual mind cannot discover, O'Neill asserts, we can access through feeling and imagination. The "big universal meaning" is powerfully and vividly impressed upon the imagination, and this can only be experienced rather than intellectualized. Based on this thought, O'Neill encourages the audience's active emotional involvement in and with the play. By adapting the expressionistic style to *Lazarus Laughed*, he constantly reinforces the audience's lively responses and reactions to the play. For this, he writes:

what I would like to see in the production of Larazus ... is for the audience to be caught enough to join in the responses – the laughter and chorus statements. (qtd. in Board 286)

Despite O'Neill's ambition to bring the audience together, the outcome is not entirely successful. The unidentified mythic narrative, based on ancient superstition, for example, can sound remote to the audience. Moreover, it is difficult to appeal to the audience merely through pure emotionalism. The play depends heavily on theatrical



presentation without affirming its moral seriousness. By re-making the biblical character into the Dionysian, O'Neill deliberately downplays the moral or didactic dimension of religious drama. He is not really interested in any serious dogmatic and rational teachings of the established Church. Instead, he focuses on primitive religious experience, which elicits uncultured emotion. He wishes that the entire theatre is unified by a strong emotion that is simultaneously discharged by means of dramatic devices. He intends to revitalize the ancient ecclesiastical instinct on a modern stage.

**(iii) *Drama is to affirm faith in life:***

*Lazarus Laughed* is religious in terms of its content as well as its theatrical style. It is concerned with what is essential in religion - that is faith. In eras of belief such as the Middle Ages, faith used to play a central role in maintaining the community. However, in the modern era, an age of unbelief, objective meaning and values of life are degraded by rationalistic relativism, and scepticism. As for this, Jennifer Wallace writes:

there are no longer any objective facts or values but rather each event is open to subjective interpretation. And this loss of faith in a shared meaning becomes itself a source of tragic despair. (75)

The “loss of faith”, Wallace indicates, is considered to be a primary cause for tragedy in the present. Sharing this thought, O'Neill wrote a letter to Theresa Helburn on April 8, 1928:

it [*Lazarus Laughed*] seems to give people new faith and religion and I firmly believe, if it is done the way the script reads, it will send people out of the theatre with *a feeling of exaltation* [emphasis added] about life that will send them to that theatre in droves ... I am certain that ‘Lazarus’ fills a long felt spiritual want that everyone today is suffering from – *want of faith in life* [emphasis added]. (*Selected Letters* 290)

Here, O'Neill conceives “the want of faith in life” as the sickness of today's life. It

may sound too profound and general to grasp its specific meaning. In order to understand more clearly what O'Neill means by saying that, it is necessary to consider the cultural background. Early twentieth century American culture is characterized by materialism. In a materialistic world that is destitute of faith, of symbol, of myth, people suffer from spiritual sterility, feelings of despair, boredom, nausea and absurdity. Mindful of this state of life-in-death, O'Neill expects that the rebirth of ritualistic drama may restore life's vitality "with a feeling of exaltation" in his words. O'Neill wishes his audience to experience something like a "religious thrill of awe," as Hegel calls it. "The religious thrill of awe" can be experienced at the climax of a religious ceremony when the participation is spiritually elevated to the celestial sphere, where he/she is completely absorbed into the divinity. This ambitious project is built on a Nietzschean structure. Nietzsche believes that art has the power to renew the vitality of life by creating the aesthetic illusion of recurring life and death. The aesthetic recurrence of the cosmic cycle is also found in *Lazarus Laughed*. The main character, in his Dionysian rapture, repeatedly invokes the following sentence: "Death is dead." (218, 310) In the Dionysian cycle, Lazarus allows himself to be saturated with a feeling of the infinite, free from the horror of the reality of mortal existence. The theatrical recurrence of life and death offers a taste of eternity, and so, O'Neill hopes, the audience may feel exalted in awe of life's mystery. However, it is difficult to find the awe-inspiring quality in O'Neill's character, Lazarus. He dares to laugh over life and death, as he is a Dionysian god. This elicits a majestic aura of divinity, but less powerfully. He lacks a crucial quality that is required for the true awe-inspiring grandeur of God. That is a sense of unshakable inner calm, and of untroubled certainty, despite tribulations and

sufferings. Such a sublime inner peace cannot be found in Lazarus. Under his panic-stricken laugh, for instance, he secretly disguises a bundle of anxieties and fears. Despite his remarkable outer resemblance to a Grecian God, and his superhuman feature, he is not fully confident in his conviction that there is no death: he weeps when his wife dies. In order to hide his uncertainty, he exaggeratedly expresses himself through his eccentric laugh. In the absence of interior stillness and self-confidence, Lazarus cannot impress others. In other words, his laughter fails to reflect a life-affirming faith. At the same time, it is also difficult to see his laughter as a mirror of his life-denying pessimism. Although he denies the reality of death, he never explicitly condemns life as it is.

Lazarus' laughter is, in fact, closer to nihilistic scepticism or cynicism, reminiscent of Nietzsche's tragic idea. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche expresses his contradictory vision of life. He, like Schopenhauer, is pessimistic, rejecting any meaningful purpose of life; he understands that the pain of life in truth is simply ugly and meaningless. On the other hand, an imaginary life can be transformed into something sublime and significant, as Nietzsche claims:

Apolline power of transfiguration ... That is the real artistic intention of Apollo, in whose name we bring together all those innumerable illusions of the beauty of appearance, which at each moment make life worth living and urge us to experience the next moment. (117)

Unlike Schopenhauer, Nietzsche opens the possibility that life can be redeemed by means of art. Art has a power not only to console and heal the wounds of life, but also to re-create life into something beautiful, joyful, and celebrating. This complexity of life both as a dreadful reality and beautiful dream, is, he asserts, encapsulated in Attic Tragedy. This theory is also shared by O'Neill. When his play is criticized as pessimistic and depressing, he defends himself by saying this:

I have been accused of unmitigated gloom. Is this a pessimistic view of life? I do not think so. There is a skin deep optimism and another higher optimism which is usually confounded with pessimism. To me, the tragic alone has that significant beauty which is truth. It is the meaning of life – and the hope. The noblest is eternally the most tragic. (qtd. in Cargill 104-105)

Distinguishing “higher optimism” from “skin deep optimism”, O’Neill implies that pain and suffering are inescapable but the shallow optimism is ignorant of this reality. On the other hand, “the higher optimism” necessarily accompanies what is “the most tragic.” Just as Nietzsche defines tragedy as an artistic actualization of the Dionysian dark pessimistic spirit by means of the Apollonian optimistic light, O’Neill considers tragedy as a compound of higher optimism and pessimism. This thought reflects his complex vision of life; O’Neill, like Nietzsche, conceives that life, as it is, is intolerably dull, ordinary, passionless, and miserable whereas life, in the illusion of art, can be re-created into something extraordinary, fascinating, and meaningful. These two contradictory realities can be, O’Neill believes, reconciled in tragedy. Refusing to be confined in either a simple optimism or pessimism, O’Neill instead follows Nietzsche’s nihilistic vision that everything is an illusion. Lazarus fanatically tries to convince himself that death as much as life is only illusionary. Therefore one should enjoy life without fear. Although Lazarus appears to enclose himself completely in the fiction of the perpetual circle of life and death, his turbulent laughter betrays a deep uneasiness, constantly threatened by the terror of the reality of life. The laughter in the drama is profoundly tragic as much as nihilistic.

Living in an unreligious century where myth and imagination are strangled by a realistic scepticism and a scientific positivism, O’Neill recognizes that people today are suffering from a lack of faith in the spiritual. Concerning the desolation of spirituality, Albert Nolan, the acclaimed contemporary theologian, explains: it is “a

hunger for freedom from materialism. The concern here is to make contact with the mystery beyond what we can see, hear, taste, touch, and smell.” (183) Prompted by this thirst for what is transcendental, O’Neill attempted to make his theatre religious. The highly ritualistic mythic play, *Lazarus Laughed*, he hopes, creates what is magical and supernatural, offering a sense of unity, life’s intensity, and of faith, although it might just be temporary. In this sense, O’Neill’s theatre is very much in debt to Nietzsche’s aesthetic theory.

#### 4. Personal Tragedy: *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

“All I wanted was a little heart-to-heart talk concerning *the infinite sorrow of life* [emphasis added].” (*Long Day's Journey Into Night* 98)

“The infinite sorrow” is deeply personal, as it is known that this drama, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is autobiographical, based on O'Neill's own family story. In the preface of the play, O'Neill writes a letter to his wife, Carlotta: “I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow written in tears and blood ... I write it with deep pity, and understanding and forgiveness for all the four haunted Tyrones.”(8) Concerning “the old sorrow” in O'Neill's family, this paper particularly focuses on Mary's sorrow. Mary Cavan Tyrone in the play corresponds to O'Neill's mother, Mary Ellen Quinlan in real life. Just like O'Neill's female protagonist, his mother attended a Catholic school, and suffered from a drug-addiction. Yet, O'Neill's mother, unlike Mary in the play, overcame her illness; she believed that she was cured by restoring her childhood devotion to the Holy Virgin Mary. Considering this fact, Mary's suffering in the play is religious as much as physical.

In this connection, it will be discussed whether Mary's spiritual struggle in search of God is melodramatic or tragic. For this discussion, two texts will help: one literary work of Robert B. Heilman *Tragedy and Melodrama*, and one philosophical text of Søren Kierkegaard *The Sickness unto Death*. Before the presentation of this argument, a summary of the play follows. It is the story of the Tyrone family. Each member of the family suffers from his/her own failure, defeat, guilt and remorse. The father, Mr Tyrone was once a successful star in the theatre, but his erroneous pursuit of easy fortune fails him as an artist. Moreover, due to his unsettled career, and his miserliness with money, he unintentionally causes his family's afflictions. The

mother and wife, Mary who always considers that she has married beneath her, hardly feels settled at home: her husband's theatrical work requires them to move from one place to another. Mary buries her misery and shame in morphine-addiction; she suffers from an acute sense of guilt for the death of her newborn baby, Eugene. Both the elder son Jamie, and the younger, Edmund are no less depressed than their parents. Having no ambition or prospects for their future, they, like their father, try to forget their wretched life through drinking.

Concerning this drama, two very different criticisms are suggested. It is praised as "perhaps the finest play (and tragedy) ever written on this continent" by John H. Raleigh (573). In contrast, Nicola Chiaromonte states that: "for three hours O'Neill compels us to take part in this monotonous and obstinate round of suffering; it would, we feel, be stupid, were it not for his sincerity." (497) In order to examine closely these contradictory considerations of the drama as either great tragedy or a drama of disaster, it is appropriate to use Robert Heilman's book, *Tragedy and Melodrama*. In this book, Heilman argues that there is no clear distinction between tragedy and melodrama; in many cases of literature, they overlap. Despite their interchangeable relationship, Heilman goes on to suggest that tragedy, as a form of literature, has certain distinctive characteristics, including: self-awareness, complexity in matters of justice and of morality, divided personality, and a hope of redemption, or "a sense of spiritual achievement" in Heilman's words.(159)

"Tragedy", Heilman defines, "is the world of self-awareness and contemplation." (125) Correspondingly, Søren Kierkegaard states:

the tragedy is not that such a self did not amount to something in the world; no, the tragedy is that he did not become aware of himself, aware that the self is a very definite something and thus the necessary. Instead, he lost himself. Because this self fantastically reflected itself in possibility. (36-7)

The discovery of truth about the self through self-reflection, as both Heilman and Kierkegaard stress, stands at the heart of tragedy. Concerning this issue of self-knowledge, Heilman goes on to explain that a tragic hero is one “who is capable of coming to knowledge of himself.”(135) A protagonist in tragedy obtains a profound self-understanding through pain and suffering, whereas life’s peril in a drama of disaster simply leads the protagonist to self-destruction, instead of any self-growth or self-recognition. Based on this theory, Heilman concludes that O’Neill’s character is melodramatic rather than tragic, because O’Neill does not “push one toward self-knowledge.” (Heilman 103) In *The Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, for instance, Mary tells her younger son, Edmund:

Now, I have to lie, especially to myself. But how can you understand, when I don’t myself. I’ve never understood anything about it, except that one day long ago I found I could no longer call my soul my own. (54)

If Mary’s inability to understand herself comes merely from her morphine addiction, she is considered to be pathetic rather than tragic; due to the effect of the drug, she occasionally relapses into a state of unconsciousness of herself. Therefore, when self-awareness is considered to be one of the most crucial characteristics found in a tragic hero, as Heilman claims, Mary is far from tragic. However, her character is more complex than simply a pitiful victim of drug abuse. What makes it difficult for her to be herself is despair, rather than her addiction itself. According to Kierkegaard, there are two types of despair. One is “not to will to be oneself”, and the other is “to will to be oneself.” The latter, Kierkegaard explains, is “the self in despair wants to be master of itself and create itself, to make his self into the self he wants to be.”(68) Refusing to acknowledge his limitation, the despairing person, in his defiance, is unwilling to surrender the self to fate or to the helping hands of others. On the



contrary, the other form of despair – “not to will to be oneself” –, Kierkegaard explains, manifests as one who desires to be someone else, because the person in his weakness of spirit is incapable of coping with his pain. This case can be applied to O’Neill’s protagonist, Mary. She, in her despair, is unwilling to admit who she is in reality. Instead, in daydreaming she pretends what she wants to be. She imagines herself to be someone else like the innocent convent girl of her past. Imitating “the shy politeness of a well-bred young girl,” Mary speaks: “I am going to be a nun – that is, if I can only find – (*She looks around the room, her forehead puckered again.*) What is it I’m looking for? I know it’s something I lost” (107). The hazy, foggy air of the drama reflects her state of mind, floating in a bottomless void of hallucination. Mary “dreamily” relates:

I really love fog ... It hides you from the world and the world from you. You feel that everything has changed, and nothing is what it seemed to be. No one can find or touch you anymore. (57)

Symbolically, the fog is considered to be a kind of shelter where Mary can hide her true self from the outside world, as her younger son, Edmund verifies: “the hardest thing to take is the blank wall she builds around her. Or it’s more like a bank of fog in which she hides and loses herself.” (84) The fog as physical phenomenon depicts not only Mary’s morphine addicted state of mind, but it is also an unassailable white wall, blocking any external access to her inner self. Mary’s self-concealment or imprisonment in fog comes from her inability to confront truth in the naked light of day; Mary conceives herself to be unbearably ugly and shameful in reality. She, like a typical tragic hero, is hypersensitive and excessively self-conscious; she feels constantly “humiliated by her inability to control the nervousness which draws attention to them [her hands],” which “were once beautiful hands... [but] now have

an ugly crippled look” due to rheumatism. (L.J.N.2) Mary with an “extreme nervous sensibility” feels it hard to be herself. (L.J.N.7) Accordingly, Mary tries to forget her painfully ugly self through her illusion. In this regard, Heilman notes: “O’Neill can imagine self-recognition only as an unbearable experience; so he veers away from the last phase of the tragic rhyme.” (294-5) According to Heilman, a tragic hero has a capacity to surpass his/her pain, and successfully gain a clear insight into her true selfhood by the end. On the other hand, Mary in O’Neill’s play, attempts to create another ego for herself. She suffers from the illusion, which leads her to the point of the self-destruction. Therefore, from Heilman’s perspective, this drama is considered to be more of a melodrama, than a tragedy.

Heilman is mainly concerned with whether misfortune brings a new positive self-growth, or self-destruction. On the other hand, O’Neill, unlike Heilman, values agony itself, more than its consequences, as he states: “the tragedy of Man is perhaps the only significant thing about him ... the individual life is made significant just by the struggle.” (qtd. in Williams 116) From O’Neill’s humanitarian outlook, Mary’s heartbreaking struggle itself is significant, and ennobling. Mary “piteously burst[s] out” to her husband: “James! I’ve tried so hard! I tried so hard! Please believe – !” (39) Mary’s excruciating effort to conquer her sickness is moving, despite her constant defeat. As it is said that the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak (Matthew 26:4), Mary against her will continually yields to her bodily weakness; she finds herself doing what she hates to do, unable to end the drug addiction. Knowing Mary’s desperate struggle, Tyrone, “helplessly” replies to her:

I supposed you did, Mary. (*Then grief-strickenly*). For the love of God, why couldn’t you have the strength to keep on? (39)

As implied in Tyrone’s words, Mary does not have “the strength that can tolerate

truth” in her sober mind (Heilman50-1); Mary never gets over her drug addiction, haunted by the pangs of a remorseful conscience. From Heilman’s view point, Mary’s passive suffering makes her melodramatic rather than tragic. Regarding the character’s lack of self-healing power in comparison to a tragic hero’s fighting spirit, Heilman disparagingly considers it melodramatic. However, what O’Neill values the most in tragedy is the depth of pain itself, and our compassionate understanding for human weakness. Writing to Lawrence Langner in August 1940, O’Neill states:

there are moments in it that suddenly strip the secret soul of a man stark naked, not in cruelty or moral superiority, but with *an understanding compassion* [emphasis added] which sees him as a victim of the ironies of life and of himself. Those moments are for me the depth of tragedy, with nothing more that can possibly be said. (qtd. in Bogard 92)

Tragedy, for O’Neill, is not just about a violent destruction or strict moral accusation. It essentially calls for spiritual gravity, deep emotions, and most of all, a sincere and understanding heart. This tragic sensibility is based on O’Neill’s consideration of a suffering person as an injured victim of fate, and of the self. This view, however, raises another significant question: how much is an individual responsible for his misfortune? Concerning this enquiry, Mary chooses to surrender herself to the mysteries of life without much questioning, as she speaks to her husband:

James! We’ve loved each other! We always will! Let’s remember only that, not try to understand what we cannot understand, or help things that cannot be helped – the things life has done to us we cannot excuse or explain. (49)

Mary’s nihilistic resignation to a life without a clear meaning is shared by her son, Edmund: “At life. It ‘s so damned crazy.”(93) In respond to Edmund’s resentment against the seemingly irrational way of life, his father, Tyrone answers: “There is nothing wrong with life. It’s we who – (*He quotes.*) ‘The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves that we are underlings.’(*He pauses-then sadly.*)” (93)

Tyrone's sense of responsibility for his own life is partly shared by Mary. Although Mary acknowledges a mysterious force which shapes her destiny beyond her control, she continues to blame herself for her family's misfortune. In a later scene, she confesses *with strange objective calm*: "I blame only myself. I swore after Eugene died I would never have another baby. I was to blame for his death." (50) Upon this self-blame, Heilman comments;

In O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the Tyrones all but live on recrimination. This is interrupted by moments of self-accusation, but these are more like sporadic, and unwanted flashes of light in a deep fog. (149)

From Heilman's analysis, Mary's spontaneous impulse to confess is not sufficient to save her from persisting self-deception, just as a momentary streak of light is insufficient to clear up the thick fog completely. However, Heilman's interpretation is not entirely convincing. He misses the importance of that moment when light erupts out of fog. It is a brief, but significantly tragic moment as Mary confronts the very truth that she cannot escape from what she is, no matter how desperately she tries to forget herself. Concerning this issue of truth, "the deep fog" is conventionally interpreted as an obstacle that hinders clear vision, obscuring truth. However, the fog itself actually contains light. No one can see direct light with unprotected eyes; it is too painful and dangerous. Light, as is truth, is also invisible by its nature; it is only through the medium of the air that light is discernable. Therefore, the fog enables Mary to see a glimpse of the light of truth, without causing immediate pain, just as "a faint haziness in the air [which] softens the glare of the sun." (L.J.N. 27)

It is difficult to evaluate to what extent Mary is willing to take responsibility for the tragic event since there is no clear distinction between guilt and innocence in tragedy; "tragedy is a realm beyond blame." (Heilman 30) Mary is simply caught up

in an impossible situation, which is tragically beyond her choice. When Mary left her baby to someone else's care, following her husband's theatre group, she simply could not predict the tragic consequences of her action; the baby dies, infected by his brother's measles. The baby's death can be attributed to Mary's negligence as a mother. At the same time, it is not entirely her fault; it was an unintentional accident. In this sense, Travis Bogard states that this play:

is tragedy – not melodrama or slice of life because each of its protagonists is partly responsible for his own destruction, and partly a victim of the family fate ... it presents the human being's true dilemma. (194-5)

"The human being's true dilemma" that is created by the paradoxical union of human choice and fate, makes O'Neill's drama tragic rather than melodramatic.

*Long Day's Journey into Night* ultimately requests compassion for the protagonist helplessly trapped in the "ironies of life." (L.J.N.92) Since "the ironies of life," O'Neill conceives, can never be fully explained or justified with logic, O'Neill expects our deep sympathetic respond to the drama, rather than a cold judgemental reason, as James, the elder son narrates: "all I wanted was a little heart-to-heart talk concerning the infinite sorrow of life" (98). "The infinite sorrow of life" flows gently throughout the play with a slow emotional movement. This subtle emotional wave is expressed by means of a subtle change of light on stage:

Act I. 8:30 am. *Sunshine comes through the windows at right.* (1)

Act II. (scene one); 12: 45 pm. *No sunlight comes into the room now through the window at right.* (27)

(scene two); 1:15 pm.

Mary: See how hazy it's getting. I can hardly see the other shore. (47)

Act III. 6:30 pm. *Dusk is gathering in the living-room, an early dusk due to the fog which ... is like a white curtain drawn down outside the window.* (56)

Act IV. Midnight. *No light shines through the front parlour.*

*In the living-room only the reading-lamp on the table is lighted.* (75)

The heat of the sun does little to burn off the passion of agony. Yet, the heavily thick fog conveys the characters' deep seated pain, whereas the pitch-black night, which gradually invades the house, expresses the family's growing fear and anxiety. In addition to the bleak lighting effect, the sound of a foghorn *is heard at regular intervals, moaning like a mournful whale*. (L.J.N. 56) The resonance of the foghorn, "like a banshee", fills the stage with a sorrowful mood. (Ibid) In order to express long-lasting pain, O'Neill also creates another brilliant theatrical illusion. While the objective time of the outside world continues to run, the subjective time in the house appears to be frozen due to the insufficient light, and fog, blurring a clear distinction between day and night. In this illusionary suspension of time, the characters plunge deeper and deeper into an endless despair, until they reach the point that they "would not feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your [their] shoulders and crushing [them] to the earth," as Edmund says. (79) In this dislocation of time, and of reality, Edmund relates, it is "like walking on the bottom of the sea. As if I had drowned long ago." (79)

Apart from the theatrical trickery of the fog which creates a dream-like atmosphere, however, O'Neill keeps the stage realistic, and simple, discarding "all exterior pressures" as Bogard notes, "strip[ing] all but the most minimal requirements from the stage, leaving the actors naked. They must play or perish." (428) Differentiating from his previous Art Theatre work, O'Neill, in this drama, is less concerned with the external presentation of the stage. Instead, his focus stays on delivering the individual's sorrow. The sorrow expressed in the drama is more than an individual's melancholic mood. It is essentially tragic, questioning the meaning of pain, and the mysterious forces, which govern an individual life.

Mary(*bitterly*). none of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things until at last everything come between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self for ever. (33)

This very moment when Mary realizes that she is powerless, assaulted by life's cruelty, is "the depth of tragedy" in O'Neill's words. Mary's bitter awareness of the futility of human will power is tragic, rather than melodramatic.

Moving deeper behind the misfortune that befalls a single family, O'Neill's drama intends to display the "background pattern of conflicting tides in the soul of Man," as O'Neill himself states. (qtd. in Lawson 44) In this statement, O'Neill assumes that the contradictory impulses in life are not merely particular or accidental. Instead, there is, O'Neill thinks, some meaningful universal design behind a person's inner conflict. Regarding "the conflicting tides" in *Long Day's of Journey into Night*, they exist in a double layer: one is among the family members, and the other takes place within each individual character's mind and soul. According to Heilman's theory, the former is closer to melodrama, whereas the latter is closer to tragedy. In melodrama, Heilman explains, the characters torment each other, whereas in tragedy, a protagonist's agony mainly takes place within his contradictory self, rather than in the external pressure of relationships with others. In the case of O'Neill's heroine, Mary, her suffering is seen as both tragic and melodramatic, from Heilman's perspective, since it occurs both inside, and outside herself. Mary's external struggle comes from her conflicting relationship with her family, as Edmund says: "in spite of loving us, she hated us!" (84) Mary's complex feeling towards her family is also delivered in her monologue:

It's so lonely here. (*Then her face hardens into bitter self-contempt.*) You're lying to yourself again. You wanted to get rid of them. Their contempt and disgust aren't pleasant company. You're glad they're gone. (*She gives a little*

*despairing laugh.*) Then Mother of God, why do I feel so lonely? (55)

Mary hates to keep her family's company, since they hardly get along, blaming one another for their own misery. At the same time, she is afraid of being alone in an empty house. Mary is melodramatic, as her contradictory attitude towards her family members merely comes from her whimsical mood. However, it reflects more than just her inconsistent temper. It moves into a deeper level of the conflict in her soul, as implied in her monologue: "I will hear myself scream with agony, and at the same time I will laugh because I will be so sure of myself." (54) Mary's dissonant inner voice mixed with screams and laughter, echo her spiritual torment between doubt and faith.

Mary's conflicting spirituality is captured in O'Neill's famous phrase, "hopeless hope." This expression first appears in his play, *Straw* (1919). It becomes a central theme of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. The "hopeless hope" in this drama has a two-fold effect on Mary: a self-destructive illusion, and a life-saving force to get through a difficulty. Mary's hope is hopeless because it holds neither the reality of the present nor any positive vision for the future; Mary simply hopes to return to her past. Mary, unhappy with her present situation, keeps looking back to the past when she was in a convent. She, *staring dreamily before her*, speaks:

I had a talk with Mother Elizabeth ... I told her I wanted to be a nun. I explained how sure I was of my vocation, that I had prayed to the Blessed Virgin to make me sure, and to find me worthy. (109)

Mary's nostalgic yearning for the bygone innocent age is nothing but "White Hope," as it is called in the drama. (101) This "White Hope" is symbolized by fog. Shrouded in the white fog, Mary deceives herself with the white lie of hope that everything will be fine, once she goes back to the past, and finds her childhood faith; in reality, her



mental disorder deteriorates towards the end of drama. While Mary's groundless illusionary hope makes her blind to the truth, her redemptive hope in her Christian faith enables her to endure the present pain and suffering, offering her meaning and purpose. Mary, brought up in an Irish Catholic family, and educated in a convent, confesses her devotion to the Holy Virgin Mary:

The Blessed Virgin Mary forgives me and gives me back the faith in Her love and pity I used to have in my convent days, I can pray to Her again ... She will believe in me, and with Her help it will be so easy. (54)

By the help of the Blessed Virgin, Mary believes, she can overcome the pain that is deeply rooted in her despairing soul. A person in despair is, Kierkegaard conceives, tormented by these two contradictory impulses; a desire for death, and a hope for life. "The torment of despair," Kierkegaard continues, "is precisely this inability to die. Thus it has more in common with the situation of a mortally ill person when he lies struggling with death and yet cannot die." (18) Applying this idea to Mary, in her despair, she continuously consumes her painful body in a self-destructive addiction. However, Mary cannot simply end her life, because she cannot completely renounce in her heart the hope that one day she may recover both physically and spiritually. Mary's continual battle between hope and despair is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's idea that: "the dying of despair continually converts itself into a living." (18) Mary is hanging in this painful suspension between living and dying. Mary's internal complex of life and death; belief and doubt; hope and despair goes beyond the black and white simplicity of a melodrama's conflict. It certainly contains a tragic profundity, calling for a universal need for "deep pity, understanding, and forgiveness" as O'Neill expresses in the preface of the drama.

Concerning a drama's denouement, Heilman states: Melodrama ends either

with “victory or defeat, whereas tragedy defines life as the paradoxical union of two.” (154) Accordingly, Heilman regards O’Neill’s work as “dramas of disaster, and decay” rather than tragedy; “in the O’Neill’s,” he concludes “all is collapse, and decay.”(160) This generalization loses its conviction, when a closer examination is undertaken for each drama of O’Neill. In *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, for instance, Mary has been defeated physically, but her survival instinct has not yet been extinguished. At the end of the drama, even amid setback and suffering, she cries out for help from the Blessed Virgin:

I went to the shrine and prayed to the Blessed Virgin and found peace again because I knew she heard my prayer and would always love me and see no harm ever came to me as long as I never lost my faith in her. (110)

Interestingly, both the Christian Mother of God, and the protagonist share the same name, Mary. Identically, they also suffer from the loss of their sons. Accordingly, associating her pain with the Blessed Virgin’s, Mary finds her hope and solace in the Holy Virgin Mary. Mary’s frustrated yearning for religious faith is expressed in the following monologue:

Mary (*looking around her*). Something I need terribly. I remember when I had it I was never lonely nor afraid. I can’t have lost it forever. I would die if I thought that. Because then there would be no hope. (108)

Assuming that her predicament is closely related to the loss of her childhood Catholic faith, Mary desperately wishes to believe in the possibility of salvation by restoring her faith in the Church. Mary’s surviving hope in redemption suggests the fact that this drama has a depth of tragedy, and is not just a drama of disaster.

Unlike his previous plays, *The Hairy Ape* and *Dynamo*, which are mainly concerned with the social and collective experience, *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* depicts an individual’s actual experience. Nonetheless, the drama’s concern is not

confined to a particular family. O'Neill's drama pushes at melodrama's narrow boundary of individuality, and enters into the territory of tragedy, which deals with a shared meaning and understanding of human suffering. This debate over the drama – whether it is melodramatic, or tragic – is an important consideration, as it offers a chance to re-evaluate the drama's significance as tragedy. Beyond this discussion, this drama importantly beseeches for “an understanding compassion” in O'Neill's words. In other words, it is “a Journey into Light – into love”, as O'Neill states in the preface.

## Part II. Samuel Beckett: *Waiting for Godot*

### 5. Beckett and History

Beckett's drama, *Waiting for Godot* was written between October 1948 and January 1949. Reflecting on the recent World War, Beckett expresses his deep scepticism over the value of human life:

Vladimir: You'd be nothing more than *a little heap of bones* [emphasis added] at the present minute, no doubt about it. (10)

This description of the devastated state of humanity is a powerful reminder of the horrifying destruction of the Holocaust, as Theodor W. Adorno states:

after the second World War, everything, including a resurrected culture, has been destroyed without realizing it; humankind continues to vegetate, creeping along after events that even the survivors cannot really survive, *on a rubbish heap* [emphasis added] that has made even reflection on one's own damaged state useless. ("Trying" 43)

Adorno's description of the survivors "on a rubbish heap" after the World War, corresponds to Beckett's depiction of humanity as "a little heap of bones." Nonetheless, it is questionable how much Beckett's experience of the war has influenced his work. During the thirties when the Nazis started consolidating their power, Beckett stayed in Germany. However, the purpose of his visit was to tour art galleries and exhibitions. His diaries during his time in Germany betray his apolitical attitude; although he distasted Germany's reckless persecution of the Jewish, Beckett notes his disinterest with many of his fellow artists' strong opposition of Nazism, and their political position. Yet, there was a brief period when Beckett took the political turmoil of the time seriously. In 1940 when Germany occupied France, Beckett worked for the French Resistance as a courier. Later, he dismisses his wartime services as "Boy Scout stuff." (qtd. in McDonald 22) Beckett could never sustain an

interest in politics, and it never fully drew his imagination. His main concern remains an “artistic expression in writing, music, and painting, not the fleeting political ideologies of nationalism or National Socialism, which he views as ludicrous or distasteful.” (McDonald 13) Consideration of this fact justifies Adorno’s apolitical reading of Beckett’s drama:

History is kept outside because it has dried up consciousness’ power to conceive it, the power to remember. Drama becomes mute gesture, freezes in the middle of dialogue. The only part of history that is still apparent is its outcome-decline. (“Trying” 46)

In response to Adorno’s scepticism over art as a reflection of history, Ronan McDonald argues: “notwithstanding Theodor Adorno’s declaration on the impossibility of art after Auschwitz, Beckett comes closest to being ‘the laureate of twentieth-century desolation.’” (2) The destruction of civilization in the twentieth century, made the possibility of writing history increasingly doubtful, as Beckett himself was sceptical about any meaning or purpose in history:

One cannot speak any more of being. One must speak only of the mess ...  
To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.  
(qtd. in Graver and Ferderman 219)

As Beckett speaks above, during his interview with Tom Driver, he perceives the world as a great “mess.” It is a mess because there is no centre, as Paul. E. Corcoran addresses: “Post-modernism ... erected on the humble acknowledgement of the end of ‘humanity’... It is not that the center does not hold, but there is no centre.”(87) The absence of an immovable centre undermines the structure of language, art, and symbolic ritual. Consequently, it brings out chaos and mess. From this perspective, the world is nothing but a grave mess because there is no logic, purpose, or coherence, but only sheer physical existence. This dark, nihilistic presentation of the human condition in Beckett’s drama reflects his sceptical view of civilization built

upon the principles of order, justice, clarity, rationality, and purity. Beckett's hostile reaction toward civilization recounts F.R. Leavis' statement in his Book, *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*: "I don't want to save our civilization- on the contrary; I want to save humanity and life from it." (qtd. in Corcoran 497)

The decline of civilization inevitably leads to degeneration into a pre-historic state, as Adorno notes: "Beckett's characters behave in precisely the primitive, behaviouristic manner appropriate to the state of affairs after the catastrophe." ("Trying" 48) When reason and logic fall short, they speak as if they are imbeciles. In the scene where "*They glare at each other angrily,*" the characters insult each other:

Vladimir: Ceremonious ape!  
Estragon: Punctilious pig!  
...  
Vladimir: Moron!  
Estragon: That's the idea, let's abuse each other/  
[*They turn, move apart, turn again and face each other*]  
Vladimir: Moron!  
Estragon: Vermin!  
Vladimir: Abortion!  
Estragon: Morpion!  
Vladimir: Sewer-rat!  
Estragon: Curate!  
Vladimir: Cretin!  
Estragon: [*With finality.*] Crrritic!  
Vladimir: Oh!  
[*He wilts, vanquished, and turns away.*] (67)

Reason, meaning, and history are lost. What is left for the characters is only a primitive struggle for survival. This echoes "fundamental sounds" in Beckett's word:

My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headache among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin.  
(Beckett and Cohn 109)

The "fundamental sounds," Beckett implies, can never be properly articulated in an

intellectual way. They are the primal cries of humanity; unapproachable to the intellect. Nonetheless, Adorno's argument that Beckett's play depicts an aimless pre-historical existence is not entirely convincing. It is because Beckett's waiting itself presupposes the concept of time; neither time nor history is completely finished in his theatre.

Concerning the controversial issue over any historical relevance of Beckett's work, Paul E. Corcoran, in his essay "*Godot is waiting too*," notes:

many humanities feel or at least write, as if history has its origins, aims, and ends... History has shape and purpose, and is even somehow a reflection, however distorted, of the hopes and sorrow of human life. Yet, history, as they very word implies, is a story that cannot be deprived of fictive elements. (495)

In support of Corcoran's argument that literature and history has in much common with literature, McDonald quotes the philosopher Schopenhauer's comment on Dante: "For whence did Dante get the material for his hell, if not from this actual world of ours?" (23) Just as Dante's image of hell is not purely the product of his imagination, McDonald argues, Beckett's apocalyptic picture of humanity mirrors the world of his time. Even if his contemporary world was perceived to be chaotic, fragmentary, incomprehensible, and purposeless, this perception is still reflected in Beckett's theatre. Accordingly McDonald claims that it is legitimate to read Beckett's theatre in a historical context. By linking Beckett's work with post-war pessimism, McDonald celebrates Beckett as "the truest voice of a ravaged post war world." (2)

According to McDonald's analysis in his book, *The Cambridge introduction to Samuel Beckett*, the historical time that Beckett lived through is "the darkest, and the most brutalised century in recorded history." (23) It was the century when the unprecedentedly brutal crime against humanity was committed throughout "two world wars, the horrors of Stalin, the Holocaust of Hitler, the disastrous Great Leap

of Mao, the brutal colonial wars in Africa and the protracted threat of atomic annihilation during the Cold War.” (Ibid.) The succession of murderous outrage, and the public massacre of innocent people unravelled the fabric of the civilization in the twentieth century. The new post-war world demands radical reflection, something very different from any other previous civilization. In response to this request for a new expression, Beckett tears up the convention of theatre, and develops his own theatrical expression. Upon this, Peter Boxall comments: “his starkly vivid stage images articulate a post-war experience that had previously been inarticuable.”(5) In order to express the inexpressible horror of war, Beckett uses an ash-like grey colour on stage. The washed-out colourless empty stage vividly captures a post-war experience on the brink of despair. This cold and minimalistic representation of bleak reality elicits a sense of unease, reflecting a total collapse of civilization after war. Importantly, Beckett’s sense of nothingness addresses a spiritual emptiness or darkness. In this regard, McDonald explains:

The skeletal creatures and pared-down sets of his plays, or the aged, bewildered, agonised narrators of his novels, are regarded as the proper artistic expression of a world bereft of transcendent hope, without God, morality, value, or even the solace of a stable selfhood. (2)

Beckett’s theatre reflects his experience of the world, as if it is forsaken by God. In the death of God, Beckett’s play raises a serious question: what it means to be human. The traditional security, born out of the belief that every person is a child of God and is therefore of supreme worth, is lost. In the godless world, a man faces the daunting task of building up his own identity without any solid foundation. This consequently creates a profound inner instability, and insecurity.

While McDonald reads Beckett’s play within a historical and cultural context, at the same time he acknowledges that Beckett’s work is not just confined to



a specific condition of his own time; it concerns “a timeless human condition.” (2) In *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, there are no definite concepts of time or space; it could be any period of time in history, and anywhere in the world:

Pozzo: Where are we?

Vladimir: I couldn't tell you. (79)

“The indefiniteness of time and place [in *Waiting for Godot*],” Cormier and Pallister said, “indicates that man's predicament is not dependent upon a particular time or place.” (39) This statement is supported by Beckett's own statement that the object of literature is “the issueless predicament of existence.” (Beckett and Cohn 97) This declaration of Beckett delivers his intention to keep the world out of art. His work is concerned with a general condition of the universe, denoting “something fundamental and trans-historical about what life and human existence were all about.” (McDonald 2) As McDonald suggests, Beckett's drama essentially depicts the universal condition of human life in general. In the following chapter, Beckett's concern for the universal human condition will be examined in association with the philosophical investigation of Existentialism.

## **6. Beckett and Philosophy**

Beckett's early critics locate his work in a specific philosophical context, Existentialism. Existentialism is one of the pessimistic philosophical movements, developed in Europe during the forties, and fifties. It is based on the principle that existence precedes essence. This formulation is often explained by the opposite one, essentialism where essence precedes existence. It is the Christian belief that God creates each individual in His image and likeness with a specific purpose. However, the innate divine intention and meaning of life are no longer certain in Existentialism. The existence and authority of God are rejected. In denial of a God-given blueprint for a human being, they emphasize an individual's freedom to decide who he is, and how he should direct his life.

Beckett's play is particularly affiliated to Albert Camus' philosophical idea of absurdity, denoting alienation, emptiness, uncertainty, insignificance, and absence. By expounding Camus' philosophical idea, Martin Esslin coined the term The 'Theatre of the Absurd', to reflect the purpose of the work of Beckett, along with other playwrights, including Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov. Regarding Esslin's appropriation of Beckett's drama as one of the examples of The 'Theatre of the Absurd', Peter Boxall notes: "this paradigm, which has remained extremely influential from the sixties to the present day, regards the plays as apolitical representations of the 'human condition.'" (7) There is little doubt about Esslin's contribution to Beckett studies: Esslin liberates Beckett's theatre from the confines of any cultural interpretation; his criticism of Beckett delivers something universal, which is still relevant to the present days. Nonetheless, Beckett himself

resisted attaching Esslin's label, the 'Theatre of the Absurd,' to his own work:

I have never accepted the notion of a theatre of the absurd, a concept that implies a judgement of value. It's not even possible to talk about truth, That's part of the anguish. (qtd. in Juliet 17)

Beckett's theatre neither explains nor discusses the existential concept of absurdity, advocated by Esslin. Despite his protest, however, his theatre embodies the idea of absurdity as a way of presenting life on stage. In this respect, by associating Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot* with Camus' work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, this paper will examine to what extent this methodology is appropriate or not.

### ***Alienation***

The notion of the 'absurd' originates from the musical term, absurdity, meaning "out of tune." (Oxford Dictionary) Based on this origin of the word, the French existentialist, Albert Camus extended its meaning within a philosophical context. Camus defines absurdity as a divorce or maladjustment "between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." (26) Man expects that the universe should be a place where there is absolute clarity of meaning. In reality, however, meanings are either obscure or absent. When man confronts the seemingly indifferent, aimless, and chaotic universe, he feels like "an alien, a stranger." (Camus 2) This alienation is a feeling of absurdity according to Camus. The feeling of isolation is further described by Camus, as follows:

in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. (3-4)

The sense of being deprived of belonging and of hope "for the absolute and for unity" (Camus 49), is the quintessence of the absurd in Camus' term. Similarly, Beckett's play shows a man's estrangement or disengagement from the higher universe that

governs his fate. This divorce is depicted through the disharmonious relationship between two main characters – Estragon and Vladimir –, and the elusive one, Godot. Estragon and Vladimir are constantly questioning, and seeking Godot, while Godot is persistently silent to their heartfelt requests, and cries. When they suffer from anguish, and insatiable longing for Godot, Godot seems to be hardly affected by their torment, as Boxall describes: “Godot, himself, cruelly indifferent to the sufferings of those who depend upon his mercy and his help.”(18) This unbalanced relationship between the suffering humanity, and the seemingly indifferent universe represented by Godot is called the absurd according to Camus. In this respect, Beckett’s drama importantly addresses humanity’s ontological insecurity: a man alone is abandoned in a silent universe.

### ***Boredom***

Vladimir: We are bored to death, there’s no denying it. (73)

Vladimir feels that life is dreadfully boring to the point of death. In this regard, Ronan McDonald notes: “inertia, punctuated with inconsequential dialogue sustains a large part of the play [*Waiting for Godot*].”(33) As McDonald remarks, the feeling of dullness of life in the drama is delivered through the characters’ dialogue. The words they use are monosyllabic and repetitive, as if to reflect the fact that their life is unbearably dull and monotonous. Their severe boredom, having no vitality, is closely related with a sense of insignificance:

Vladimir: There are radishes and turnips.

Estragon: Are there no carrots?

...

Vladimir: It’s a radish.

Estragon: I only like the pink ones, you know that! ... I’ll go and get a carrot.

[*He does not move.*]

Vladimir: This is becoming really insignificant.

Estragon: Not enough.  
[*Silence.*] (60)

Just like the ridiculously pointless choice over radishes, turnips, and carrots, Vladimir feels that life is appallingly worthless and insignificant. Accordingly, life without a meaningful purpose or driving goal makes them terribly bored, as if they are living a life in death. In this regard, Günther Anders notes: “Beckett’s heroes are ... unable to distinguish between being and non-being.”(142) Life is so dull, and purposeless that Beckett’s people are no longer sure about the fact that they are actually alive:

Vladimir: [Without anger.] It’s not certain.  
Estragon: No, nothing is certain.  
[Vladimir slowly crosses the stage and sits down besides Estragon.] (47)

### ***Existence beyond Dualism: Body and Mind***

When nothing is certain, everything becomes doubtful, even their existence. In their desolation, they desperately seek for something that gives them an impression of being alive, as Estragon speaks: “We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?” (61) A possible answer for this question is found in Camus’ statement: “the flesh is my only certainty.” (85) In the ‘death of God’, where a man has lost certainty of meaning, the only substance that one can rely on is the body. For Beckett’s characters, their bodies are the only certainty that asserts their existence. The corporeal reality of existence is expressed theatrically in an irregular form. In this regard, Enoch Brater states: “Beckett has all four characters continue their lines for several minutes of stage time while remaining flat on their backs or on their stomachs.” (203) By positioning the players in this oddly distorted way, Beckett’s theatre accentuates the immediate pain in the body. Estragon suffers from

sore feet. Pozzo is blind whereas Lucky is dumb, and extremely fatigued from carrying Pozzo's heavy baggage. Through their bodily suffering, they verify the fact that they are still alive. This anti-humanistic realization of existence raises a critical question, as Boxall states:

How can one approach this total collapse, this extreme statement of the inadequacy of stories that we construct to protect ourselves from the brute absurdity of physical existence, with a coherent critical language? (10)

Beckett's presentation of the strikingly naked reality of the corporeal, Boxall insists, goes beyond any intellectually comprehensive interpretation. Nonetheless, it is not just about "the brute absurdity of physical existence." (10)

Breaking the surface of the somatic events, Beckett's theatre divulges spiritual tremors at a deeper level of existence. In a physical sense, nothing significant happens. Yet, things are not always as they appear. The characters' physical performances are expression of their inner world of anxiety and distress. This unstable state of mind obviously manifests itself in Vladimir's highly animated movement:

*Enter VLADIMIR agitatedly. He halts and looks long at the tree, then suddenly begins to move feverishly about the stage. He halts before the boots, picks one up, examines it, sniffs it, manifests disgust, puts it back carefully. Comes and goes. Halts extreme right and gazes into distance off, shading his eyes with his hand. Comes and goes. Halts extreme left, as before. Comes and goes. Halts suddenly and begins to sing loudly. (48)*

After his strenuously hyperactive movements, walking back and forth around the stage, he gets fatigued. Accordingly, "*he remains a moment silent and motionless.*" (49) When he becomes static, it is as though something has drained out of him. When he stops moving, it is as though he is dead. After the brief silent and frozen moment, however, he resumes his feverish motion on the stage. Vladimir's agitated action demonstrates his state of mind which is intensely irritated, and uneasy. Like Camus,

Beckett considers the importance of corporeal reality. Yet, he, unlike Camus, pays significant attention to spirituality simultaneously. On the other hand, Beckett refuses to confine existence to two extremes: all-embracing thought (idealism) or one single physicality (materialism). Traditional Western philosophy aligns materialism with the body and idealism with the soul. In this system, body and soul are recognized as duality, and their values contrasted. This proposition – body is opposite to mind – interrupts the dynamic interaction between matter and spirit. In Beckett's theatre, the body is closely tied with the mind. The inseparability of body and soul is expressed through the interdependent relationship between Estragon and Vladimir. In this regard, Cormier and Pallister explain:

the nature of the relationship between Estragon and Vladimir is extrasocietal (or metaphysical). Vladimir is to some extent more rational than Estragon, and Estragon more body-oriented than Vladimir. To the degree that the two characters can be made to fuse into a symbolic whole, not only is the mind/body dichotomy represented but also the fundamental interdependence and inseparability of mind and body. (14)

According to Cormier and Pallister's interpretation, Estragon represents the body, whereas Vladimir is the intellectual. Each of them cannot stand by himself. They can be a whole only when they have each other: "man is not a soul, trapped in an earth-bound body like a violin shut up in a wooden case: he is a whole being, the violin, the violin case, the music ... read to be redeemed as one." (Watts 7)

### ***Crisis of Meaning and Identity***

In *Waiting for Godot*, the entire stage is almost empty, with very few objects just bare country road, and a mound with a tree. When Pozzo, in his blindness, asks them to describe the place where they are, Vladimir is *looking around*, and replies:

“It’s indescribable. It’s like nothing. There’s nothing.” (79) The bareness of the place is purged of any detail of colour, and image. It is almost like a blank canvas on which to experiment. The eeriness of empty, grey, cold space invites the audience to contemplate human life in its blankness. The bizarre and unfamiliarly portrait of the world in its emptiness expresses a deeply uneasy sense of existence, devoid of any definite meaning or content. The empty space on Beckett’s stage signifies the absence of meaning; meaning is not pre-existent. The only meaning the world has is the meaning we give it: a world whose meaning is historically conditioned, culturally derived and constructed. At this point, Beckett’s theatre raises one critical question. If a man alone confronts his place within a timeless universe, where history and culture have lost their continuity, and sensible meaning, how can the individual define his own identity without any social, cultural, or religious references? Who are those four human characters on stage?

One way to guess their identities is through their relationship with one another. Pozzo and Lucky, for instance, are in a master and slave relationship. Pozzo demands and Lucky follows his orders. Therefore, Pozzo can be someone from a ruling power, like a property-owner, a chairman of a company, or a politician, whereas Lucky is in an exploited position, like a tenant, or a working-class man, or a citizen. However, there is no clarity about their profession or status in society. In the case of the main characters, Estragon and Vladimir their relationship appears to be more equal than that of Pozzo, and Lucky. Although Vladimir speaks more intellectually than Estragon, they share their lives; they chat, play, eat, hug and wait. They look like good old friends or a couple. Yet, in the absence of any social profiles about them, it is difficult to know who they are as individuals. In this regard,



Cormier and Pallister write:

what Beckett seems to be saying, then, is that we are unable to establish a person's identity by traditional means(name, age, place, profession, and possessions). He may even intend to imply that identity cannot be established at all. (34)

As Cormier and Pallister argue, Beckett's theatre eliminates social and cultural limitations in order to reveal the fact that an individual identity is ultimately indefinable. In support of this argument, Boxall notes: "The myths of national and personal identity, the construction of a stable system of beliefs that help to make sense of our being in the world, all such narratives prove themselves to be woefully inadequate in the face of the horrifying actuality of existence." (24) Beckett's theatre shows that the identity that we think we have is nothing but an illusion, which is historically, socially, and culturally constructed. When any specific social or cultural references are taken away from him, an individual person's identity puts into question.

The perplexity of the constantly shifting identity is expressed in the scene where they keep exchanging their hats, until they reach the point that they are no longer sure of their own hat:

*Estragon takes Vladimir's hat. Vladimir adjusts Lucky's hat on his head. Estragon hands Vladimir's hat back to Vladimir who takes it and hands it back to Estragon who takes it and hands it back to Vladimir who takes it and throws it down. (W.G. 64)*

A hat is a personal belonging, and it symbolizes the dignity of the individual person. Yet, in Beckett's world, just like those exchangeable hats, an individual's identity is not stable but fluid, as Boxall explains: "Vladimir and Estragon's stability as characters is given to no guarantee. Vladimir may be heavier than Estragon, he may be lighter ... Vladimir may actually be called Mister Albert ... Estragon's name may

be Catullas.” (12)

What they appear is different from who they are in reality. Concerning the instability of individual identity, Esslin raises an interesting question: “Can we ever be sure that the human beings we meet are the same today as they were yesterday?”(*Absurd* 25) As for this question, Esslin takes the following scene as an example:

Vladimir: Yes you do know them.  
Estragon: No, I don't know them.  
Vladimir: We know them, I tell you. You forget everything.  
[*Pause. To himself.*] Unless they're not the same ...  
Estragon: Why didn't they recognize us, then?  
Vladimir: That means nothing. I too pretended not to recognize them.  
And then nobody ever recognizes us. (47).

Here, Estragon fails to recognize Pozzo and Lucky, whom they met in the first act. There is no guarantee that the person that we met yesterday is the same person that we meet today. It is because our identity keeps changing, as Beckett states: “we are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday.”(*Proust* 13) When there is no fixed identity or unique individuality, this means that one individual person may be replaced by another, as Beckett writes: “life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals.” (*Proust* 8) Beckett's statement implies that there is little worth in an individual life, because it is a series of many other lives. On the other hand, this also opens a positive interpretation, as Boxall states:

Gogo and Didi may appear to be on the verge of fading out ...[On the other hand,] Gogo and Didi are not on the brink of becoming nobody at all, because they promise to become ‘everyman.’ By the steady removal of all individual qualities, the play arrives at a picture of all-encompassing generality. (16)

To be nobody, Boxall considers, contains a potential to be everybody. In support of this view, Alain Robbier-Grillet states: “at last we would see Beckett's man, we would

see Man.”(111) Beckett’s individual character may represent Man in general. Yet, the question still remains what it means to be a human being in a world, where there is no stable meaning and truth.

### ***Beckett’s Characters vs. Camus’ Absurd Man***

“Action is in itself useless.” (Camus 84)

This idea of Camus is both confirmed and dismissed by Beckett. Camus’ claim of the futility of human action is based on the proposition that the human condition is fundamentally fixed in its ultimate meaninglessness. Accordingly, Camus draws the conclusion that nothing can be changed or improved by human effort. As an example of this, Camus introduces Sisyphus, who is condemned by the gods to roll a rock up to the summit of mountain, only for it to constantly roll back. No matter how much effort he exerts, he is destined to fail. Likewise, Beckett expresses his sceptical view over the significance of human struggling:

Estragon: No use struggling.  
Vladimir: One is what one is.  
Estragon: No use wriggling.  
Vladimir: The essential doesn’t change  
Estragon: Nothing can be done. (14)

From Estragon’s speech, it is inferred that waiting is conceived as a futile way to waste time. The sense of helplessness comes from the fact that the human condition cannot be changed, as Vladimir implies in saying: “the essential doesn’t change.” This recalls the Biblical saying: “everything that happens was already determined long ago.” (Ecclesiastes 6:10) If everything is pre-determined by either the law of nature or God’s providence, human struggle is bound to be in vain. This deterministic perspective of life creates a sense of futility in action. Nonetheless, unlike Camus,

Beckett refuses to jump to the conclusion that all human actions are ultimately insignificant. He values certain acts of humanity, such as kindness and compassion.

Beckett's characters express their concern for other suffering people. There is a scene where Pozzo has fallen to the ground, and cries for help. When Estragon hesitates to help him, Vladimir speaks:

Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! [*Pause.Vehemently*] ... Let us do something, while we have the chance! ... To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! ... All mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it before it is too late! (71)

To help someone in trouble, Vladimir considers, is not a matter of discussion, but action. In a certain situation where one hears cries for help, it is useless to analyze the situation with reason. Vladimir does not want to be reasonable, but simply be helpful to others. Helping someone offers him a sense of self-worth, as he states: "it is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed." (71) Accordingly, Vladimir considers, a specific action like kindness is important. This counteracts Camus's thought that "action is in itself useless" (84).

According to Camus' description, an absurd man is abandoned alone in "the middle of that colourless desert where all certainties have become stones." (24) The man's heart is like stone in response to other suffering people. Camus's 'absurd' man is extremely egoistic, completely indifferent to others. Although Beckett's men, like Camus' man, thrive in a world deserted by God, they still respect and exercise some virtues of humanity, like charity, and kindness. This sets them aside from Camus' absurd man.

According to Camus' explanation, there are three essential characteristics of an 'absurd' man: freedom, passion, and revolt. The absurd man, without a definite goal of life, is free from commitment, and so he can fully enjoy the present moment

with maximum *liberty* and *passion*. Camus perceives life with pure pleasure, rather than with meaning. As a good example of this, Camus introduces the famous fictional rogue and libertine, Don Juan. Camus praises him as an idealistic model of absurd man. Don Juan is recklessly liberal and passionate. He indulges himself in the great liberty of sensual pleasure, free from any ethical or religious obligation or responsibility. For the absurd man, any hope or expectation for the unknown future is a burden, creating nothing but fear and anxiety. Accordingly, Camus celebrates freedom in hopelessness: the man who has nothing to lose is free. Camus believes that the present can be fully lived without a goal. Rejecting tomorrow is what is called “*revolt*” by Camus. Expectation for tomorrow, Camus thinks, restricts one’s liberty to enjoy the present moment fully; hope is a burden to Camus. He refuses to discuss something beyond the present.

Having hope in something beyond the empirical reality is, Camus conceives, irrational, or illusionary, and ultimately beyond fulfilment. Since unobtainable hope makes one suffer, Camus considers, it would be better to “to live without appeal.” Here, the “appeal” involves something transcendental like God or eternal life. The very idea of religious transcendence is, Camus considers, nothing more than delusion. Instead of seeking solace in the transcendental, an absurd man confronts the anguish of the human condition without any illusionary hope or faith. On the other hand, Camus’ man is not free as he is locked in the prison of here-and-now actuality. He is enclosed within finite time. In this respect, Camus’ absurd man is different from Beckett’s people. They keep struggling to transcend or overcome their present predicament: “the greatest absurdity of all is the subconscious effort of the characters to transcend self.” (Cormier 94)

Beckett's characters, unlike the 'absurd' mad, have future. At the beginning of the play Estragon struggles to remove his boot, declaring "nothing to be done." (3) Later Vladimir and Estragon remember what keeps them together:

Estragon Let's go  
Vladimir We can't.  
Estragon Why?  
Vladimir We're waiting for Godot. (6)

Godot is believed to be someone who can reverse the fortune of their lives:

Vladimir :You can always hang yourself tomorrow.[*Pause.*]  
Unless Godot comes.  
Estragon: And if he come?  
Vladimir: We'll be saved. (87)

The expectation of meeting Godot prevails upon Vladimir and Estragon, making it possible for them to continue to wait and live. The vision of Godot, held by them, is a future without tears: "tomorrow everything will be better." (W.G. 46)

### ***Beckett beyond Nihilism***

"If man realizes that the universe like him can love and suffer," Camus argues, "he would be reconciled." (16) Unfortunately, in Beckett's universe, there seems to be no loving and suffering God; it is an empty space, infinitely indifferent to human affairs. When man cannot be reconciled with the universe, Camus describes the 'absurd' man as perpetually living a life where "the mind and this world [are] straining against each other without being able to embrace each other." (39) Camus sees life in a continual torment without remedy. Accordingly Camus asserts: "the important thing is ... not to be cured, but to live with one's ailments." (37) This presumption leads to the conclusion:

Estragon : The best thing would be to kill me like the other.  
Vladimir : What other? [*Pause*] what other?

Estragon : Like billions of others. (56)

This dialogue refers to Silenus' famous saying that "the best of all is unobtainable-- not to be born, to be nothing. The second best is to die early." Although Beckett, like Silenus, expresses his bleak and nihilistic perspective of existence, his play at the same time displays the fallacy of nihilistic theory. In this regard, Günther Anders writes something interesting:

even the nihilists wish to go on living, or at least they don't wish not to be a live...What Beckett presents is not nihilism, but the inability of man to be a nihilist even in a situation of utter hopelessness. They are not nihilists. (144)

Beckett's theatre presents the impossibility of a nihilistic principle. It is because living a life exceeds any kind of principles:

Estragon: It's not worth while now.

[*Silence.*]

Vladimir : No, it not worth while now.

[*Silence.*]

Estragon: Well? Shall we go?

Vladimir : Yes, let's go.

[*They do no move.*] (47)

As they do not judge their lives to be worthwhile, only as a time of waiting, it is reasonable for them to want to end their lives early. In reality, however, they cannot simply walk away from life, giving up all their seemingly hopeless hope; they still remain alive. This is the mystery or absurdity of life in Beckett's play.

### ***Beckett beyond Philosophy***

“ When Heidegger and Sartre speak of a contrast between being and existence, they may be right, I don't know, but their language is too philosophical for me.” (qtd. in Graver and Federman 219)

On this remark from Beckett, Adorno notes: “Beckett shrugs his shoulders at the possibility of philosophy today.” (“Trying” 43) Here, Adorno suggests that Beckett

negates any theoretical or philosophical way of thinking and perceiving life. As Adorno argues, it can be inappropriate to confine Beckett's play within a specific theory or philosophy. Beckett's dramatization of the human predicament goes beyond any intellectual criticism. Although those questions that Beckett addresses in his theatre are deeply philosophical, such as the human condition and the meaning of life, Beckett's language is obviously different from the philosophical one. Beckett's language is essentially about feeling and emotion rather than reason.

"The reason is impotent when it hears this cry from the heart." (Camus 25)

When a human heart demands understanding, and an explanation of his suffering, the mind fails to respond to it. In this regard, Adorno states: "reason can subsume suffering under concepts: It can furnish means to alleviate suffering; but it can never express suffering in the medium of experience." (*Aesthetic* 27) Profound feelings of the human heart can be neither understood nor expressed fully by reason alone. Accordingly, Adorno continues to explain: "even when it is understood, suffering remains mute and inconsequential." (28) Adorno conceives art as "the language of suffering". As much as suffering itself, Adorno claims, art can never be fully appreciated by pure reason. From this point of view, Beckett's theatre can never be rationalized, because it is essentially about suffering as is implied in Vladimir's speech: "the air is full of our cries." (83) The hollowness of the air is resonating with our cries, issuing from the depth of existential nothingness. Vladimir's speech recalls Frederick Lumley's statement: "in the sudden explosion logic and reason had given way to primitive emotions and declamation." (92) As Lumley implies, excessive pain makes one lose reason:

Vladimir: I do not understand.

Estragon: Use your intelligence, can't you?



[Vladimir *uses his intelligence.*]

Vladimir : [*Finally.*] I remain in the dark. (10)

Although Vladimir feels that he is unable to think clearly, reason is not completely absent. Reason exists, but incompletely. The following dialogue is a good example of this:

Estragon: [*giving up again.* ] Nothing to be done.

Vladimir: [*advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart*]: I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. (1)

This dialogue, like many others in the play does not sound coherent in a logical sense. Yet there is a certain logic in Vladimir's speech. In order to reach the conclusion that there is "nothing to be done", as Estragon suggests, it is necessary to try everything possible. At the same time, Vladimir's statement is nonsense, because it is impossible for one to try all infinite possibilities. His speech is logical, and illogical simultaneously, and this represents the world that is "neither so rational nor so irrational" as Camus expresses. (47) This ambiguous world, which appears to be reasonable, but not rational enough for us to understand clearly, becomes the source of our intellectual frustration, as G.K. Chesterton wrote in his book *Orthodoxy*:

the real trouble with this world of ours is not that it is an unreasonable world, nor even that it is a reasonable one. The commonest kind of trouble is that it is nearly reasonable, but not quite. (90)

As the western philosophers like Camus and Chesterton conceive, there is a distinction between appearance and reality. In this chasm, Beckett's characters fall into "immense confusion." (W.G.72) There is no clarity but only confusion in Beckett's world. This confusion occurs when one tries to squeeze the unfathomable mystery of life into the narrow box of reason; life is beyond human understanding. This awareness of the limit of human reason is the quintessence of Beckett's play.

What Beckett is looking for is something neither entirely rational nor irrational. He searches for something authentic. Commenting on the originality of Beckett's theatre, Jacques Lemarchand notes:

I do not quite know how to begin describing this play by Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* ... One feels if each time one is called upon to describe a work that is beautiful, but of an unusual beauty; new, but genuinely new; traditional, but of an eminent tradition; clever, but with a cleverness the most clever professors are unable to teach; and finally, intelligent, but with that clear intelligence that is non-negotiable in the schools.  
(qtd. in Graver and Federman 90)

It is inadequate, Lemarchand implies, to apply any theoretical interpretation to Beckett's play. What distinguishes Beckett's work from other philosophical work is that it *embodies* the concept of the 'absurdity' in a concrete theatrical form. Beckett's way of presenting human life on stage is more concrete and physical, than abstract or metaphysical, as Boxall writes: "By exploiting the physical presence of the stage to its maximum potential, Beckett is able to dramatise the collapse of metaphysical meaning structures around the naked truth of 'being there.'" (24) This argument that Beckett's theatre is essentially physical is supported by Beckett's own statement:

I don't like to talk intellectually about a play which has to be played simply in order to be an intellectual play. I would like to talk about how you go to sleep or how you eat the carrots. (qtd. in Brater 197)

Beckett understands and presents human existence as an actual physical experience, rather than an intellectual process of abstract thinking. In the reflection of ordinary daily life, Beckett presents it on stage with a simple physical actuality, rather than complicating it with philosophical abstraction:

Estragon:[*Violently.*] I'm hungry.  
Vladimir: Do you want a carrot?  
Estragon: Is that all there is?  
Vladimir: I might have some turnips.  
Estragon: Give me a carrot. [Vladimir *rummages in his pockets, takes out a turnip and gives it to Estragon who takes a bite out of it. Angrily.*] It's a turnip! (12)

Estragon's manic obsession with the carrot is absurd, and laughable. This is how Beckett presents life as real, divesting it of any tediously serious philosophical explanation. Just like the simple and random dialogue in his play, Beckett perceives that it is not necessary to understand life in an intellectual or coherent way all the time. His theatre is not to teach philosophical ideas, but to represent something most basic and concrete about humanity. Accordingly Beckett's play cannot be preserved within any conventional meaning, ideology and interpretation. In the end, too much intellectual analysis may blur the vision given dynamic expression of Beckett's play.

## 7. Beckett's Language: Unintelligibility, Loquacity, Simplicity and Silence

### (i) Unintelligibility

Beckett's theatre subverts the intelligibility of language. Language itself, for Beckett is not just an intellectual prop. Beckett's dialogue is to be felt and to be performed, rather than to be rationalized, and enlightened, as Fredrick Lumley notes:

If a play is only to be judged as intellectual dialogue, far better to read the play. For a performance is to be felt, not thought ... The aim of the theatre was not to make itself understood but to make it felt that it was through the prestige of a language alone. (12)

Beckett's anti-intellectual achievement on stage manifests itself in the stage-dialogue. By exposing humbug and the ignominious use of language, Beckett with his wit transfigures these vulgar words into something entertaining:

Vladimir: Moron!  
Estragon: That's the idea, let's abuse each other/  
[*They turn, move apart, turn again and face each other.*]  
Vladimir: Moron!  
Estragon: Vermin!  
Vladimir: Abortion!  
Estragon: Morpion!  
Vladimir: Sewer-rat!  
Estragon: Curate!  
Vladimir: Cretin!  
Estragon: [*With finality.*] Crrritic!  
Vladimir: Oh!  
[*He wilts, vanquished, and turns away.*] (67)

Like banter exchanged by the characters, Beckett implies that a human life can be ridiculous and unintelligible. At the same time, however, it can be simply enjoyable. Beckett's cheerfulness defeats the negative thought of a human condition. Their insulting word-game culminates with the word 'critic'. Beckett's satirical mocking of critics implicitly protest against any theoretical attempt to discover meaning in his

drama. Meaning in Beckett's theatre, however, is deferred rather than absent in its totality, as Terry Eagleton claims:

the act of waiting is ... a perpetual deferent of meaning, an anticipation of the future which is always a way of life in the present. This suggests that to live is to defer, to put off a final meaning. (*Meaning* 103)

The deferred meaning of hope is expressed through the continual act of waiting in Beckett's play. The waiting itself demonstrates the fact that a life's meaning is postponed, rather than non-existent. Corresponding with Eagleton's claim that meaning in Beckett's play is waiting to be discovered, rather than absent, Theodor W.

Adorno notes:

There is no longer any substantive, affirmative metaphysical meaning that could provide dramatic form with its law and its epiphany.... drama cannot simply take negative meaning, the absence of meaning ... The essence of drama was constituted by that meaning. ("Trying" 41)

Adorno suggests that Beckett's art rejects affirmative meaning; meanings are too ambiguous to be clarified. Yet, Beckett's language cannot be simply dismissed as trivial nonsense. Art creates meaning even in the apparently meaningless reality, as

Adorno asserts in his book, *Aesthetic Theory*:

Art is illusion in that it cannot escape the hypnotic suggestion of meaning amid a general loss of meaning ... Art continues to live up to the postulate of meaning even though it rigorously negates it ... the best absurdists are more than just plain meaningless. (221)

As both Adorno and Eagleton argue, Beckett's play postulates meaning in the meaningless. Ironically, to understand the unintelligibility of Beckett's language is, already an intellectual formation of meaning.

## **(ii) Loquacity**

The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express. (*Proust* 103)

Beckett's speech delivers his artistic frustration, having no inspiration in a spiritless world. In a world, devoid of spirituality, Beckett finds it hard to discover something worthwhile to express. Despite his scepticism, Beckett expresses a strong sense of his vocation as an artist; he feels responsible for creating an expression even when there is "nothing to express." (*Proust* 103) Beckett's artistic urge is mixed with his anxiety about the inadequacy of language. In this regard, Martin Esslin remarks:

if, in happier period of history the artist could have no doubt that by his work he was exalting the glory of the Creator. Today, if he has lost the faith, religious or secular, of his predecessors, he is left to fend himself, without intelligible purpose in a world devoid of meaning. And yet the urge, the inescapable compulsion to express. (*Absurd* 2)

In correspondence with Esslin's argument, Ramona Cormier also notes: "ironically enough, it is through language itself that Beckett exhibits for us the limitations of language." (118) As both Esslin and Cormier demonstrate, it is through language that Beckett demonstrates the restrictions of language. Beckett's language challenges to express something inexpressible, such as a voice of despair:

Estragon: All the dead voices ...  
Vladimir: What do they say?  
Estragon: They talk about their lives.  
Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.  
Estragon: They have to talk about. (54)

Their life, filled with "all the dead voices", appears completely dumb, meaningless, and unintelligible. Despite this feeling, they still need to talk about it; they can neither dismiss nor ignore life simply as being nonsense. They wish to prove the fact that everything must have meaning, and there must be a rational explanation for even their apparently senseless lives. Out of this desperation to comprehend what has happen in their lives, they feel that they should talk about it. Talking is a way of reasoning, and thinking. By talking, thinking, and doubting, they not only affirm, but

also denounce meanings of their life, as Adorno notes: “thought” is “a means to produce meaning in the work” and “a means to expresses the absence of meaning.” (“Trying” 41) On the other hand, for Beckett’s characters, talking is not necessarily a process of reasoning, as Cormier and Pallister suggest:

the two men fall back upon the mere rudiments of conversation in an effort to avoid thinking and hearing ... The important thing for them is not the content of the conversation but simply that there is conversation. (44)

For Beckett’s characters, it is not important whether their conversation is meaningful or not. Instead, what matters for them is the fact that they are talking. Talking gives them the impression that they are doing something. It also makes them bear something unbearable – the boredom of waiting. As if they are playing a game, they displace fragmentary words in pairs:

Estragon: What do we do now?  
Vladimir: While waiting.  
Estragon: While waiting.  
[*Silence.*]  
Vladimir: We could do our exercises.  
Estragon: Our movements.  
Vladimir: Our elevations.  
Estragon: Our relaxations.  
Vladimir: Our elongations.  
Estragon: Our relaxations.  
Vladimir: To warm us up.  
Estragon: To calm us down. (68)

What they are doing is almost like a vocal or physical exercise rather than having a conversation: they are incapable of coherent conversation. Concerning the difficulties of communication, Beckett states:

The attempt to communicate where no communication is possible is merely a simian vulgarity, or horribly comic, like the madness that holds a conversation with the furniture. (*Proust* 46)

Here, Beckett describes his frustrating experience of communication as though he speaks to an inanimate object, the furniture. His scepticism over the possibility of

communication reflects his fear of being vulnerable to others:

Vladimir: I felt lonely.

Estragon: I had a dream.

Vladimir: Don't tell me!

Estragon: I dreamt that –

Vladimir: DON'T TELL ME !

Estragon: [*Gesture towards the universe.*] This one is enough for you? [*Silence.*]

It's not nice of you, Didi. Who am I to tell my private nightmares to  
if I can't tell them to you?

Vladimir: Let them remain private. You know I can't bear that. (8)

Each of two characters has their own nightmares in reality and illusion. When Estragon tries to share his nightmare with Vladimir, Vladimir refuses to listen to it. It is because he thinks that he cannot afford to be involved in another nightmare; for Vladimir, the reality of waiting itself is already a formidable nightmare. In this regard, Dan O. Via Jr. states: "the two men feel the need for true community and want it; yet they are unwilling or unable to pay the price for it. It is really too painful to be open and available to others." (34) The two lonely men feel they need one another. Yet, they are unwilling to open themselves to the other. Instead, they retreat into the cell of their own miserable self. When they face their own predicament, they get entirely self-absorbed in it: they are imprisoned in themselves. Estragon and Vladimir's suicidal thought is related to their narcissism, as Cormier and Pallister argue: "the theme of suicide running through the play can also be tied to this narcissistic strain." (21) In support of this argument, Cormier and Pallister cite the following example:

Pozzo: I used to have wonderful sight – but are we friends?

Estragon: (laughing noisily). He wants to know if we are friends!

Vladimir: No, he means friends of his. (77)

In this dialogue, Beckett reveals his scepticism of the possibility of having a relationship without any egoistic or selfish motivation. When neither experience nor



story can be shared, the frustration is relived through a meaninglessly extended monologue. In the scene where Lucky is asked to demonstrate his “thinking” ability, he starts a long, and chaotic speech. Lucky’s monologue is made up from a collage of nonsense, stuffed with excessively intellectual words. Lucky’s speech is almost hysterical, repulsive, horrific and shocking, as if it is the voice of anger against intellect. It, at the same time, creates an aesthetic experience of fear and terror. It sounds frighteningly grotesque to the audience. This loquacity reflects an emptiness at the core of existence: “there’s no lack of void.” (W.G. 57) The void entails “a melancholia, a state of accidie, a despair, lethargy.” (Watts 31) To fill the spiritual vacuum, the characters continue to talk. However, it only creates a bigger emptiness because there is little significance in their dialogue, as it is expressed “there wasn’t a word of truth in it.” (W.G.27) The more they talk, the more they get distracted and agitated. Their incessantly pointless talk reflects their state of mind, which is not grounded, hanging in the middle of nowhere: “where are we?” (W.G.79) With no sense of direction in their life, they feel hopelessly lost. When their endless, pointless chatter goes nowhere, they are left with a bitter sense of hollowness, and emptiness. In spite of their failure to make any sense when talking, they cannot help but still talking: “Estragon: we are incapable of keeping silent.” (53) It is as if they were “cursed of not being able to stop talking.” (Blanchot 97) This is a part of their anguish.

### **(iii) Simplicity**

“I take away all the accidentals because I want to come down to the bedrock of the essentials, the archetypal.” (*Proust* 8)

In order to stay focused on what are the “essentials,” Beckett discards all “the

accidentals” of theatrical *mise en scene*. In doing so, he tries to re-create the most basic condition of human life on stage. In this regard, Peter Boxall notes:

what Beckett achieves in *Godot*, some argued, is the removal of all the distracting baggage of everyday life, to reveal to the audience an essential truth about humanity ... he depicts the naked human, deprived of all comforting myths, awaiting validation from a higher source. (13)

The man, naked and abandoned in a wasteland without any soothing illusion, starts questioning: what does it mean to be human? Responding to this essential question,

Jonathan Boulter notes:

he [Beckett] is after an analysis of the fundamentals, the core, or ‘essence’ of what maps out human experience ... Here Beckett is asking a crucial, perhaps the *fundamental*, question: What does it mean to exist, to *be*, at the moment when your life is on the verge of flickering out? (10)

According to Boulter’s interpretation, the fundamental, which runs through the core of Beckett’s theatre addresses the question of the meaning of life at a time of crisis. In approaching this universal and compound issue, interestingly, Beckett assumes that “the essentials” should be simple. Accordingly, Beckett keeps his work radically simple, as he explained to his American director, Alan Schneider: “I feel the only line is to refuse to be involved in exegesis of any kind. And to insist on the extreme simplicity of dramatic situation and issue.” (Beckett and Cohn 109) Upon “the extreme simplicity” of Beckett’s work, Boulter comments:

Beckett tends to strip away all excess on stage and page ... Beckett pares plot, characters, and language down to its essential, stripping away the ‘meat’ (of both prose and character) to examine life lived at extreme limit points. (10)

Beckett economizes theatrical expression by eliminating those conventional apparatuses of drama such as stage-directions, plot, setting, and action. As for Beckett’s anti-theatrical representation, Boxall notes:

The boldness with which *Godot* undermined dramatic conventions caused a huge sensation, and the play commanded a great deal of attention, but the very

newness that so distinguished it made it very hard to interpret or even to describe (5).

“The very newness” of Beckett’s theatricality, Boxall explains, makes it difficult to understand his work. In this regard, Ronan McDonald speaks:

it is customary to think of ‘difficulty’ or ‘obscurity’ as being all about what we do not know. But Beckett proves that the experience of difficulty can come from simplicity as well as from complexity. (4)

As McDonald indicates, Beckett’s play is difficult to understand due to its radical simplicity, rather than its intellectual or theatrical complexity. Beckett keeps his work in an almost abstract form, leaving any textual meaning elliptical, and evasive. In order to do so, he intentionally uses a minimalistic expression of language. This was a marked distinction from the figurative language of Joyce, as Beckett made clear:

I realized that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one’s material. He was always adding to it ... I realised that my own way was...in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding. (qtd. in Knowlson 319)

While Joyce writes with detailed description, Beckett pursues simplicity in his work. Beckett reasons for this: “Joyce is a superb manipulator of material ... The kind of work I do is one in which I’m not master of my material ... I’m working with impotence, ignorance.” (qtd. in Knowlson 319) By attributing his reductive writing strategy to his “ignorance,” Beckett makes himself humble. Nonetheless, it is suspected that there is another hidden reason for this approach. Beckett secretly wishes to be distinguished from Joyce. This can be inferred from Beckett’s dialogue with George Duthuit:

I speak of an art turning from it in disgust, weary of puny exploit, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road. (*Proust* 103)

Weary of exiting literary conventions, Beckett developed his own unique way of

writing with an almost childlike simplicity. As for the art of simplification, interestingly, Beckett finds his inspiration in the Bible or other religious texts like St. Augustine, as Beckett testifies:

I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe them. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine. I wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin than in English, 'Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned.' That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters. (qtd. in Worton 75)

Commenting on Beckett's speech, Michael Worton states: "this suggests that, as a playwright, he[Beckett] considers structure to be more important than any 'message' for the communicative functioning of a play." (75) Adorno observes something similar: "in Beckett, the form overtakes what is expressed." ("Trying" 40) As Worton and Adorno suggest, Beckett's theatre focuses on how to express rather than what to express. Concerning Augustine's writing, for instance, Beckett is more interested in its form than its content. Inspired by Augustine's geometrical style of writing, Beckett composed *Waiting for Godot* with a very close eye on its formation; it is rigorously arranged work with two acts, and neatly stacked with two pairs of characters. Beckett's symmetric perfection, is praised by Boxall: "it is in Beckett's perfect symmetry and formal brilliance, reminiscent of music in its rhythmical poises that his art gives expression to the void." (56) The empty space of Beckett's theatre effuses the aesthetic beauty, as Boxall elaborates his description:

It is in the beauty and symmetry of the shapes that Beckett makes on stage that the redeeming quality of his vision can be found. He may give expression to a humanity that has become detached from metaphysical and theological roots, but the sheer, ineffable beauty and grace of the dramatic structures with which he expresses humanity in crisis provides the drama with its own meaning and its own epiphany. (7)

Beckett's theatre, as Boxall describes, radiates its own aesthetic light of order, and this gives a consolation to humanity on the edge of chaos. As Beckett remarks in his

interview with Tom Drive: “The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess. It is not a mess you can make sense of.” (qtd. in Graver and Federman 219) Beckett sees life as a great mess. It is a chaos rather than a cosmos. It is disordered, fragmented, irrational, and incomprehensible. The mess of life, Beckett hopes, can be redeemed by art. Regarding the redemptive power of art, Boxall explains:

Art should move us; art should console us; art should console us; art should tell us something essential and permanent about the human condition; art has a moral responsibility to help us cope with the world as it is; if it cannot change the world, it must at least make it beautify. These prerequisites had seemed to be met, albeit in peculiar fashion, in *Godot*. (21)

To the world, full of chaos and confusion, Beckett’s theatre offers an aesthetical consolation with its simplicity of order and structure.

#### **(iv) Silence**

“All artists dream of a silence which they must enter, as some creatures return to the sea to spawn.” by Iris Murdoch

In pursuit of his artistic dream, Beckett dives into the sea of silence, as Richard Ellmann said: “Beckett was addicted to silences.” (661) Beckett’s drama unfolds in an immeasurable richness of silence. In *Waiting for Godot* there are frequent pauses, and silent intervals. Silence in Beckett’s play expresses something deeply embedded in the human heart: sorrow, and joy, fear and love, life and death. In order to express the ineffable emotions of humanity, Beckett employs the eloquence of silence; Beckett’s expression of silence, however, runs up against the limits of reason and language.

## *Silence as an expression of anxiety*

When silence falls in the middle of their conversation, Vladimir gets increasingly irritated, and impatient. It is as if he is afraid of losing voices or sound:

Vladimir: Say something!

Estragon: I'm trying.

[*Long silence.*]

Vladimir: [*In anguish.*] Say anything at all! (54)

Silence makes him feel terrified, as if he is abandoned alone in a soundless desert. It is as though "everything stands completely still and silence threatens to swallow everything up." (Graver 36) With the sounds of life swallowed by silence, and the limits of language reached, another silent terror is invoked: death. As silence threatens him with the inescapable thought of death, he desperately tries to distract himself with any sound, noise, and chatter. Vladimir cannot tolerate silence because of its oppressiveness: silence oppresses humanity's need to express the truth. In this regard, Beckett states: "It's not even possible to talk about truth, That's part of the anguish." (qtd. in Juliet 17) Concerning this issue of truth and meaning, Beckett is extremely reticent. As Beckett implies, truth is not something to be obtained through speech. The unspeakable part of truth remains in silence. This is "part of the anguish" as Beckett expresses it. Out of this anguish, Vladimir almost neurotically needs to talk non-stop. They cling to talk and explanation as if their lives depended on it. Nonetheless, Vladimir's compulsion to speak excites more anxiety, and restlessness rather than calming him. Their talk fails to discover the truth through their experience of life. They can neither talk nor comprehend properly what is happening to them.

Vladimir: This is getting alarming.

[*Silence. Vladimir deep in thought, Estragon pulling at his toes.*] (3)

Vladimir's silence reflects his anxiety about meaninglessness. As time runs out

without significance, Vladimir feels at loss, not knowing what to do, and how to govern his time.

***Silence as a meditative form of fervent prayer, expressing tension between anguish longing and frustration***

Vladimir: You have a message from Mr. Godot.  
Boy: Yes, sir.  
Vladimir: He won't come this evening.  
Boy: No, sir.  
Vladimir: But he'll come tomorrow.  
Boy: Yes, sir.  
Vladimir: Without fail.  
Boy: Yes, sir.  
[*Silence.*] (84)

Here, the silence expresses Vladimir's disappointment upon hearing the news that Mr. Godot is not coming this evening. At the same time, silence expresses Vladimir desperate wish that Godot will come tomorrow. The silence is like a fervent prayer, relieving his struggling heart of frustration and giving him hope. In the following dialogue, Vladimir asks the Boy about Mr. Godot's appearance:

Vladimir: [*Softly.*] Has he a beard, Mr Godot?  
Boy: Yes, Sir.  
Vladimir: Fair ... [*He hesitates*] ... or black?  
Boy: I think it's white, sir.  
[*Silence.*]  
Vladimir : Christ have mercy on us!  
[*Silence.*] (85)

In the first silence after the Boy's statement, Vladimir tries to imagine how Godot looks. The fact that he has a white beard indicates his advanced age. Accordingly, the second silence in the dialogue above carries Vladimir's worries and doubt: whether the old man still has a good enough memory to remember his promise, and if he is physically strong enough to come and carry them to the place where they are supposed to be. Increasingly doubtful about the power and faithfulness of Godot,

Vladimir insists that the Boy should deliver his message without fail:

Boy: What am I to tell Mr. Godot, sir?

Vladimir: Tell him ... [*He hesitates*] ... tell him you saw me and that ...

[*He hesitates*] ... that you saw me ... [*Pause. Vladimir advances, the Boy recoils. Vladimir halts, the Boy halts. With sudden violence.*] You're sure you saw me, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me! [*Silence. Vladimir makes a sudden spring forward, the Boy avoids him and exit running. Silence. The sun sets, the moon rises. As in Act One. Vladimir stands motionless and bowed.*] (85)

While Vladimir tries hard to stay faithful to Godot, he is not quite confident in his belief; he is constantly doubtful and fearful. Silence expresses Vladimir's wrestling heart, torn by faith and doubt; in silence, he contemplates his inner conflict. At the same time silence ceases all his strivings. Being completely consumed by the strain and agony, Vladimir stands still: silence lets his flesh retire. In his helplessness, he bows down his head, as if he accepts his defeat, and surrenders himself to the inevitable, fate. This pictorial image of Vladimir in his stillness elicits the solemn pathos of Christ, when he bows his head on the Cross in obedience to God's Will. When Vladimir suffers in silence, it creates a deep sympathy, and the audience pities the crushed character.

Silence also delivers the characters' mutual understanding and compassion to one another:

Estragon: It's not worth while now.

[*Silence.*]

Vladimir : No, it not worth while now.

[*Silence.*]

Estragon: Well? Shall we go?

Vladimir : Yes, let's go.

[*They do no move.*] (47)

When they reach the mutual agreement that their life is not worthwhile, there is a moment of silence. The silent moment is reflective, rather than interruptive. This moment of pause delivers profound pain and despair within them. In silence,



Estragon and Vladimir share their deepest pain, which cannot be expressed in words. Through their silent agreement, they ponder death as a possible choice to exit, bringing their infinitely painful and sorry lives to an end. This thought of formless death overshadows their mind in silence. It is a moment of a great tension, expressing their trembling heart with fear and anxiety. Yet the silence paralyzes the will to take action: “the action, such as it is, is continually threatening to yield to the long, awkward silences that the audience can feel gathering behind the dialogue.” (Boxall 12) The motionless silent moment has a magnetic power to hold them from the temptation to take an irreversible action; committing suicide. The silence exudes some unspeakable force of life. The mysterious force of silence can be identified as a “stubborn hope in the human heart.” (Camus 100) In this regard, Günther Anders remarks: “life must have meaning even in a manifestly meaningless situation ... [Vladimir and Estragon] are incapable of losing hope.” (144) There is so little we can actually understand about the characters, except that they cling on to hope in the face of an apparently meaningless situation. In this sense, waiting itself is a silent protest against despair.

### ***Silence as an expression of Solitude***

“We are alone. We cannot know and we cannot be known.”(Proust 66)

Beckett considers solitude as the human condition. Beckett’s protagonist retreats inwardly, removed from history and society; the individual is left to himself. Their experience of isolation is deeply religious. In this regard, Mary Bryden makes an insightful remark:

Like Estragon and Vladimir, Christ is seen as a victim twice over; of a God who does not come to his help, and of other human beings who are stronger and more

violent than he. For the Godot comrades, Christ is indeed most accessible in his stripped and victimised role, since there are circumstances to which they can relate. (141)

Just like the crucified Christ, forsaken by God and his people, Beckett's characters remain all alone in the world, where there is no God only human cruelty. Finding no justification or solace for their distress in the mundane secular society, Beckett's characters deliberately retreat into a desert, where they experience "solitude, stillness, and silence." (Bryden 163) There are no living creatures but only a leafless tree on a mound. This external emptiness projects the characters' inner solitude. Their experience of isolation is ontological, as Cormier comments: "man's fundamental condition is, rather, one of solitude, a condition that the characters in the play wish to eliminate. It is impossible for them to do this." (45) Didi and Gogo are contemplative: their words and movements are simple and repetitious. To do something simple repetitively is a part of the contemplative life. Most of all, Silence is vital in a contemplate life. The frequent silence and motionless moments in between their dialogue elicit a meditative atmosphere, as Boxall explains: "Didi and Gogo stand for the contemplative life ... the contemplative man for such moments of insight, of spiritual communication, as occurs in his life." (15) Silence displays the characters' deep spirituality.

"I will lead my beloved into the wilderness and will speak to her in her heart"

(Hosea 2:14).

Beckett's characters are like the religious hermits who seek God in the wilderness, fleeing from their fellow men: Just as a mythical hermit or religious people listen to God's voice in the wilderness, Vladimir, in a wasteland, hears a voice from the depth of his desolate heart:

Vladimir: Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. [*He listens.*] (83)

Vladimir contemplates the sorrow and pain of existence. His sorrow comes from the knowledge that he is a mortal and finite being, walking toward the inescapable final destination, death:

Vladimir: In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness. (73)

While Vladimir despairs at his mortality, Vladimir also desperately tries to transcend the existential condition. By withdrawing the mind from all the early affairs, and distractions, Vladimir, like a hermit, contemplates the presentence of God in his solitude. This spiritual recollection that the soul is alone with God or the divine is exercised by Beckett's characters. Vladimir and Estragon are alone in a barren area, no trace of life. When their senses perceive nothing but an empty void, they are left with the idea that God sees them *perhaps* :

Estragon: Do you think God sees me?

Vladimir: You must close your eyes.

[*Estragon closes his eyes, staggers worse.*] (69)

### ***Silence as an expression of the inexplicable: God(ot)***

Godot exists in a state of absolute silence. His silence creates a spiritual emptiness in the characters: "there is no lack of void." (W.G.57) The void is filled with "all the dead voices." (W.G.54) It is like "the air is full of our cries." (W.G.83) The cries of a despairing humanity are in stark contrast to Godot's persistent silence. It is precisely his silence that makes the characters suffer: "waiting for night, waiting for Godot, waiting for ... waiting. All evening we have struggled, unassisted." (W.G.69) Here, Vladimir expresses his frustration with Godot who is

so cruelly apathetic, silent and indifferent to their suffering. In the absence of any support, Vladimir has to suffer all by himself. The “unassisted” struggle makes him feel painfully isolated. Beckett’s characters are alone in a sense that that they are unable to associate themselves with Godot, which appears to be dumb, hollow, and apathetic. His silence makes it hard for them to justify their struggle:

Estragon: No use struggling.

Vladimir: One is what one is.

Estragon: No use wriggling.

Vladimir: The essential doesn’t change. (14)

While they are frustrated with their futile struggle, Vladimir acknowledges that the present affliction is only temporary. He believes that there is something or someone immutable beyond this fleeting life: “The essential doesn’t change.” (14) This conviction is considerably religious, as Vladimir continues to say: “One is what one is.” This statement recalls the biblical reference to God’s name, Yahweh: “I am what I am.” (Exodus 3:15) In this sense, Godot stands for someone like a Christian God.

Then, how do the characters conceive Godot as God? In the play, Godot is considered a transcendental being, living beyond the earthly space. In Act One, Vladimir keeps looking at the sky (26, 29). Vladimir’s “inspection of the sky” (26) reflects his assumption that Godot/God exists somewhere out there: He is someone transcendental, and inaccessible:

Estragon: Do you think God sees me?

Vladimir: You must close your eyes.

[Estragon *closes his eyes, staggers worse.*] (69)

For Vladimir, God either in the sky or his mind is ultimately the Other. God exists at a formless abstract. On the other hand, the idea of God in Beckett’s play is as much physically as metaphysical. According to the Christian belief, God is incarnated in Christ. This Christian idea can be applied to Beckett’s play, as Dan O. Vai, Jr remarks:

“Just as Jesus identifies himself with his poor brothers (Matthew 25:35 ff), so here Godot appears in the very characters of the play.”(33) Vai identifies Godot with Jesus, the embodiment of God. Just as it is believed that Christ dwells among the poor, Vai suggests that God(ot) too emerges in these poor and pitiful characters. At this point, a question arises; what makes the characters the poorest of the poor? They are poor in both a material and physical sense. They are tramps, living in great poverty; all they have is some carrots and turnips. Their wretchedness is described vividly by Estragon: “All my lousy life I’ve crawled about in the mud!” (52) Crawling in the mud, Estragon’s feet were miserably wounded and worn out. The scene where Estragon’s feet are bleeding is revealing: Vladimir: “[*To Estragon.*] Show.[*Estragon shows his leg. To Pozzo, angrily.*] He’s bleeding!” (25) Estragon’s feet, covered with sores and blood, mirrors the bruised and disfigured body of Christ on the Cross. As if Estragon is commemorating the Passion of Christ, Estragon bears the agony in his body. Estragon’s injured feet are waiting to be cleaned and to be cured, just as the Disciples’ feet in the Bible were washed by Christ.

Beckett’s characters are poor in their will and spirit: Estragon: “Then it’ll be day again [*Pause. Despairing.*] What’ll we do, what’ll we do!” (63) Without any sense of purpose or direction, they feel utterly lost, not knowing what to do with their life. At the same time, they are struggling with a sense of the insignificance of their being, as is evident in Vladimir’s speech: “it is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed.” (71) Vladimir conceives of himself to be completely powerless and useless. Ironically, it is precisely their littleness and lowliness that makes them long for powerful being, God(ot):

Estragon: Do you think God sees me?  
Vladimir: You must close your eyes.

[Estragon *closes his eyes, staggers worse.*]

Estragon: [*Stopping, brandishing his fists, at the top of his voice.*]

God have pity on me!

Vladimir: [*Vexed.*] And me?

Estragon: On me! On me! Pity! On me! (69)

Estragon's inquiry raises the profound theological question whether an individual is perceived by God or not : "*Esse est percipi* (To be is to be perceived)." Bishop Berkeley's phrase was well known to Beckett from his time at Trinity College, Dublin. From 1923 to 1927, Beckett's took a class taught by A.A. Luce, known as one of the most influential scholars of Berkeley. Berkeley is mentioned in Lucky's disordered monologue in the play: "since the death of Bishop Berkeley being to the tune of one inch four ounce." (W.G 37) According to Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge*, it is suggested:

whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, I find the ideas actually perceived by Sense have not a like dependence on my will. When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or no, or to determine what particular objects shall present themselves to my view; and so likewise as to the hearing and other senses; the ideas imprinted on them are not creatures of my will. There is therefore some other Will or Spirit that produces them. (No.29)

Berkeley asserts that human beings can never experience the world around them independently: self-perception, Berkeley believes, reflects a higher Will or Spirit. Essentially Berkeley's philosophy is built upon the theological belief that human existence is contingent on a Higher Will and Spirit. In this respect, Estragon's request "Do you think that God sees me?" displays the character's profound spirituality, which questions his existential relationship with higher entities, like God or the Universe. At the same time, Estragon's query delivers his struggle to grasp the significance of his existence. They feel that they are insignificantly small in a vast universe. Yet if they are perceived by an omniscient God, this would restore

significance to their existence.

*Waiting for Godot* exhibits significant theological allusions, which open the possibility of Godot as a Christian God. Nonetheless, the idea of God in Beckett's play is not theologically or historically formulated. The characters, like Beckett himself, are detached from any established social or religious system. They are not pious Christians. They are seeking for something or someone that they do not know well; his knowledge and idea of God is not imposed or pre-fixed by any specific religion. Accordingly, through Godot's silence, Beckett concludes, God is ultimately unutterable, and unknowable.

## 8. Beckett on pilgrimage into the unknown

What would the world be, once bereft  
Of wet and wildness? Let them be left,  
O let them be left, wildness and wet;  
Long live the weeds and the wilderness *yet* [emphasis added].

*Inversnaid*, Gerard Manley Hopkins

The ‘yet’ of Hopkin’s poem, interestingly, foreshadows the ‘perhaps’ of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*: “Vladimir: This is awful! ... No no! [*He reflects.*] We could start all over again *perhaps* [emphasis added].”(55) It is important to pay attention to the expression, ‘perhaps’ as Beckett states: “The key word in my plays is ‘perhaps.’” (qtd. in Graver 220) Beckett’s ‘perhaps’ delivers a strong sense of hope in an apparently hopeless situation. Beckett’s play shows less the knowledge of existence, and more of the hope of existence. Hope is concealed in the darkness, but its concealment radiates hope even more brightly. Just like Hopkins’ ‘yet’, Beckett’s ‘perhaps’ delivers his anxious longing for salvation in the midst of his spiritual darkness: “Tonight *perhaps* [emphasis added] we shall sleep in his place, in the warmth, dry, our bellies full, on the straw. It is worth waiting for that, is it not?”(qtd. in Esslin, *Absurd* 52) Referring to this part, which appears only in the French version of the play, Martin Esslin writes that it:

clearly suggests the peace, the rest from waiting, the sense of having arrive in a haven, that Godot represents to the two tramps ... they will no longer be tramps homeless wanderers, but will have arrived home. (*Absurd* 52-3)

As Esslin suggests, Godot’s arrival signifies salvation from all the miseries of their life. When he comes, the weariness of their journey on earth will be ended, and they shall repose their restless body and mind at their ultimate destination, ‘home’ *perhaps*.



On Good Friday 13 April 1906, William Frank Beckett, a successful quantity surveyor, and May Barclay had their second son, Samuel Barclay Beckett; it was 4 years after their first son, Frank Edward Beckett was born. The family had a large house with a garden and tennis court in the village of Foxrock, eight miles south of Dublin, where Samuel Beckett spent his childhood. Samuel Beckett would often walk with his father around the countryside and the nearby Leopardstown Racecourse. Beckett recalls his childhood as being: “uneventful. You might say I had a happy childhood ... although I had little talent for happiness. My parents did everything that they could to make a child happy. But I was often lonely.” (Bair 14) Although Beckett was brought up by a wealthy and stable family without any major domestic disturbance, he felt alone and unhappy. Beckett’s loneliness and alienation is closely related to his extreme shyness, and his solitary nature; Ronan McDonald identified that his painful “shyness that afflicted him all his life.” (11) The shy, solitary young man “with little talent for happiness” found the sources of unhappiness in existence itself rather than in family, society or politics. Upon this, McDonald comments:

a young man, who nonetheless enjoyed a loving and cushioned upbringing, cannot find the causes of his misery in evidently temporary terms. So he finds the causes of unhappiness more readily in a pessimistic view of the world or in existence itself. (9)

As for Beckett’s unhappiness, McDonald finds its source in Beckett’s pessimistic nature. In a deeper sense, however, it is also closely related to Beckett’s conflict with his family’s religion. Beckett’s family belonged to the Church of Ireland. Raised in a Protestant family in a country largely dominated by the Catholic Church, Beckett felt marginalized. As Ronan McDonald states: “the young Beckett was something of an outsider, an experience which may have fed his later explorations of dislocated or

marginal conditions.” (7) His Irish Protestantism became a source of conflict in his identity, leading him frequently to ask “Who am I?” This question is often shared by “a typical Anglo-Irish boy” who is neither wholly English nor wholly Irish. (7) Beckett’s relationship with his mother was as complex as that with his religion. Beckett, in his interview with Tom Driver, said that his mother was “deeply religious,” although he himself had “no religious feeling.” (qtd. in Graver 220) Beckett’s friction with his mother culminated when he returned home in 1937 after his tour of Germany. In a letter to his friend Thomas MacGreevy, he wrote: “I am what her savage loving has made me, and it is good that one of us should accept that finally.” (Knowlson 273) Mary Beckett was furious with her son’s involvement in a literary court case where Beckett was depicted as “a blasphemous and decadent ‘intellectual’ living in Paris.” (Ibid) From the conservative Irish standard of the time, Beckett was considered to be religiously and intellectually corrupt. When he was questioned whether he was ‘Christian, Jew, or Atheist’, Beckett answered that he identified himself with none of the three. Hearing this testimony, his mother felt deeply disappointed and humiliated. However, Beckett’s conflicting relationship with his mother had a turning point when he was attacked by a prostitute on the street in Paris. On his recovery in hospital, Beckett wrote to MacGreevy: “I felt great gusts of affection and esteem and compassion for her. What a relationship!” (282) While Beckett soothed the friction with his mother, his flickering religious consciousness remained unresolved. Although Beckett falls outside formal Christian religion, he still retains the quenchless thirst for spiritual roots. Out of this nostalgic longing, mixed with doubt and an unsettled feeling, Beckett embarks on his own spiritual journey. This paper will examine if it is feasible to read Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*

as a Christian pilgrimage.

Life itself may be considered a pilgrimage. The road in this instance is time. The traveller is the individual's soul. The destination is death, and whatever lies beyond. (Davidson xviii-xix)

The road trip in Beckett's play is used as a vehicle to represent life as a pilgrimage. The road on the stage signifies the passage of time, whereas the two travellers represent individual souls, making their own kind of pilgrimage. Once they start their journey in life, there is no turning back, only pressing forward, so as to attain and achieve the possibility that they may reach a destination. However, their destination is not yet found. In reading *Waiting for Godot* as a book of spiritual journey, it is instructive to compare the play to Daniel Defoe's famous novel, *Robinson Crusoe*; the novel depicts a man's unshakeable faith in Providence. After a tumultuous shipwreck on sea-voyage, a sailor, Robinson Crusoe is cast upon desert island, called "The Island of Despair." On shore, Robinson Crusoe looks into the distance, awaiting the arrival of a ship that will bring him back home. This fictional situation bears a remarkable resemblance to the dramatic situation in Beckett's play. Vladimir and Estragon find themselves somewhere like "The Island of Despair." In the parched place of the desert, Vladimir and Estragon are always waiting for Godot who may deliver them home, or to a promised land. Although the journey in the novel ends with Robinson Crusoe's safe return home, Beckett's characters are still clinging on to the wreckage, waiting to be delivered to a place where there is rest and peace for their restless hearts.

The two men, Vladimir and Estragon are on a road trip. Who are they? Where are they going and why? Apart from the fact that they are waiting for someone, the purpose of their trip is extremely dubious. Nonetheless, there are

certain characteristics which open the possibility of considering Beckett's characters as pilgrims, not just ordinary travellers. This subject matter will be further discussed in the following part.

### ***Waiting for Godot*** as a universal drama of pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is a journey to visit a specific place with a particular religious purpose like adoration, petition, or obligation. In general, a journey assumes a specific space and time, involving physical activities, and practices. Beyond the physical level, the concept of pilgrimage is expanded to a spiritual space. In the broadest sense, a journey that concerns an individual's spiritual well-being is considered as a religious pilgrimage: "the pilgrim's literal journey through time and space demands a parallel journey of spiritual growth or change or enlightenment." (Davidson xvii) This concept of pilgrimage as both a physical and spiritual journey is applicable to Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*. Estragon's understanding of journey is more physical than spiritual. Estragon expresses his wish to visit the Holy Land:

Vladimir: Did you ever read the Bible?

Estragon: The Bible ... [*He reflects.*] I must have taken a look at it ... I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Colour they were. Very pretty.

The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty.

That's where we'll go, I used to say, that's where we'll go for our honeymoon. We'll swim. We'll be happy. (14)

As Estragon states, his mental picture of the Holy Land is visual, confined to a concrete space on a map. The motivation itself distinguishes a pilgrim from an ordinary tourist. The latter travels mainly for pleasure or relaxation, whereas the former has a particular religious goal. Estragon's intention to visit the Holy Land is also secular rather than religious. He wants to visit there for pleasure rather than for any particular religious purpose.

Strictly speaking, there is little evidence to prove that the two wayfarers, Vladimir and Estragon are Christians. They, like Beckett himself, are detached from any authorized religion. They are renegades or doubters rather than pious believers. Yet their journey takes a form of pilgrimage in searching for something unknown. Pilgrimage is founded upon three fundamental beliefs:

The first is the conviction that there are forces infinitely larger than ourselves – gods, superheroes, the tectonic plates of history...The second is that each of us has the potential to initiate a meaningful relationship with those forces. The third is that there are certain special places where the remote, transcendental power of those forces seems close enough for us to touch. (Davidson xvii)

These three ideas are considered to be the foundational convictions, which motivate pilgrims to take on a journey. These convictions are also found in Beckett's play: "the endless hours of travel invite solitary reflection on the state of one's being." (Davidson xxii) Just as a pilgrimage journey offers an opportunity to be alone in contemplation of one's own identity in relation to God, Beckett's characters in the loneliness of their journey, ponder who they are. To wait means to be conscious of the existence of a higher entity, God, and to contemplate an individual life in relation to Him:

Estragon: Do you think God sees me?  
Vladimir: You must close your eyes.  
[*Estragon closes his eyes, staggers worse.*] (69)

Their contemplation on God in relationship with their individual self is profoundly religious, as Günther Anders attests: "Estragon's query about whether God sees him is startling, partly because it can be read as evidence that Godot must be a person, but equally importantly, because it displays a fervent spirituality." (66) Beckett's characters imagine God as a person who is looking after them, even when they feel that God is absent or silent. In this respect, they can be considered to be pilgrims in

search of God.

“Pilgrimage is a journey to a place that opens a door to something transcendental experience.” (Davidson xviii-xix) Pilgrims also believe that there are sacred places, where they may make contact with the divine. In Beckett’s play, the characters’ pilgrimage takes place in a desert. This empty and desolate place opens the possibility of an encounter with someone transcendental:

### ***Overview of Pilgrimage Experience***

Central to this enquiry is the work of Edith and Victor Turner, influential anthropologists in the field of sacred pilgrimage. The Turners’ theory is applicable to Beckett’s play as they: “perceive pilgrims en route as stepping out of their base culture to join – albeit temporarily – a new society based on classless shared experience, which they call *communitas*.” (Davidson xviii) The key words emphasised by the Turners’ theory are the *liminoid* phenomenon, an anti-social structure, and the *communitas*, the shared equality of the pilgrim experience. According to the Turners, there are three stages of the pilgrimage experience:

separation (the start of the journey), the liminal stage (the journey itself, the sojourn at the shrine, the encounter with the sacred), and reaggregation (the home coming). (Turner, Edith 19)

In the case of Beckett’s characters, they are at the second stage of their journey – the liminal stage. They are in the transitional state between leaving home and arriving back at home. Liminal, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, means a transitional stage of process, yet the Turners utilize the term in relation to a social structure; they define liminality as “a temporary release from social ties” in order to enter into a new *communitas*. (Turner, Edith 19)

Pilgrims are freed from any specific social structure: “the pilgrim seeks temporary release from the structures that normally bind him.” (Turners 9) The temporary separation from any social, cultural or religious structure, Turner considers, is the beginning of the pilgrimage. In search for something beyond the ordinary, material and superficial, pilgrims depart temporarily from their familiar environment; they “abandon the tight structures of kinship and locality, and voyage far.”(Turners 13) By leaving behind their domestic or social titles, pilgrims choose to become strangers by exposing themselves to unfamiliar surroundings. “The English word pilgrimage stems from a Latin root that means “stranger,” itself derived from the words for “through fields.” (Davidson xvii) Likewise Beckett’s characters are strangers, wandering around some unknown open space. In this regard, Turner states that pilgrimage “offers liberation from profane social structures that are symbiotic with a specific religious system.” (9) In this respect, Beckett’s characters are free in a sense that they are outside any mundane society or particular religious system. They are socially unidentifiable; any specific cultural, historical, political, or religious reference is erased. Who we are is defined by what we are doing. Beckett’s characters, however, have no definite occupation. Accordingly, it is difficult to know who they are in society. We do not even know what their real names are. As pilgrims often do, they use different pseudonyms: Gogo and Didi or Mister Albert and Catullas, or Vladimir and Estragon. They simply identify themselves as “wayfarers.” (8) The two wayfarers, like pilgrims, are equal in their relationship; social class has little significance. Free from any social and cultural convention or hierarchy, pilgrims experience *communitas*, denoting a profound sense of human fellowship, while helping one another to get through difficulties of the journey. Similarly, Beckett’s play

depicts strong feelings of compassion, human-kindness, unity, and brotherhood between two travellers. Vladimir says to Estragon: “You’re my only hope.” (10)

### **The Pilgrimage Experience (i) Physical Hardship**

The long dusty roads of pilgrimage, the perilous sea journeys, bandit-infested forests, unscrupulous innkeepers, uncertain lodging, food and water, and the expense of the journey are all seen as sacrifices. (Davidson xxii)

As it is described above, pilgrimage often demands sacrifices as a part of penance. In order to obtain pardon for specific personal sin or guilt, pilgrims give up their ordinary comforts, and take various physical and psychological challenges. Traditionally, pilgrimage demands severe physical discomfort, and abstinence:

It is a deep penitence that a layman lay aside his weapons and travel far barefoot and nowhere pass a second night and fast and watch much and pray fervently, by day and by night and willingly undergo fatigue and be so squalid that iron come not on hair or on nail. (Thorpe 411-2)

Beckett’s play depicts the hardships of journey such as poverty, walking barefoot, fasting and praying fervently. Unlike ordinary travellers, pilgrims are expected to free themselves from any worldly attachments or considerations. They are recommended not to carry any valuable and unnecessary possessions, and simple dress is preferred. Like pilgrims, Beckett’s characters are empty-handed, having no valuable possessions, wearing very simple, humble clothes. Their pitifully worn-out garb, like pilgrims’ attire, manifests the hardship of their travelling life on a dusty road.

Just as a Christian pilgrim sometimes travels barefoot with a religious purpose, Estragon expresses his willingness to do the same:

Vladimir: Your boots. What are you doing with your boots?

Estragon: [*Turning to look at the boots.*] I’m leaving them there. [*Pause.*]  
Another will come, just as ... as me, but with smaller feet, and they’ll make



him happy.  
Vladimir: But you can't go barefoot!  
Estragon: Christ did.  
Vladimir: Christ! What's Christ got to with it? You're not going to compare yourself to Christ!  
Estragon: All my life I've compared myself to him. (46)

Estragon insists that he is willing to sacrifice his own comfort or boots in order to follow Christ as a poor man, enduring the pain in his body and soul. Through the penitential sacrifice, Christians believe, an individual body and soul is purified and redeemed from mortal sin. Likewise, Estragon's walking barefoot in memory of Christ can be considered an act of penance in order to secure his salvation.

Fasting is also practised as an act of penance during pilgrimage. Just as pilgrims sustain their journey with only a modest amount of coarse food, Vladimir and Estragon suffer from a shortage of food; the only food that they have is some carrots, and turnips. In his desperate hunger, Estragon shamelessly begs Pozzo for the leftovers from his meal. From a Christian perspective, however, it is considered to be virtuous. By reducing the self to a humiliated position, a pilgrim modifies his pride, and obtains the virtue of the contrite and humble heart. By enduring the hardship of the journey through abstinence, pilgrims believe, they become worthy to deserve what they are asking in their prayer:

Pilgrims are likely to believe that the more they suffer for their faith, the greater the likelihood that their prayer will be answered. The higher the cost, the greater the value received. (Davidson xxii)

In this respect, Beckett's characters' suffering can be seen as voluntary. Through suffering, they make themselves worthy to receive what they are waiting for.

## **The Pilgrimage Experience (ii) Mental-hardship**

In addition to the physical difficulties, pilgrims face extraordinary emotional

and mental challenge, including depression, loneliness and restlessness. At the beginning of the journey, pilgrims expect something extraordinary, like a miraculous cure, or life-transforming enlightenment. By visiting sacred shrines or places, where miracles have historically happened, the believers hope to be cured from certain physical or psychological distress. Being touched by some miraculous supernatural power or sacredness, the participants also wish to be drawn closer to their God. In reality, such a dramatic conversion does not happen often. As the journey continues through days and nights without sufficient rest, they get physically exhausted, and spiritually weary. Even if a strong spiritual or religious goal beckons them to embark on a voyage, their initial zeal fades with time. As time passes away, they are likely to lose their early passionate drive or motivation to push forward on their journey. The journey itself is arduous, and inconvenient. When the actual experience of pilgrimage turns out to be very different from their initial expectation, pilgrims get disappointed temporarily or depressed for a longer period of time. This pilgrimage experience of moving from exhilaration to disappointment and depression is expressed through the change of light in Beckett's drama:

*The light suddenly fails. In a moment it is night. The moon rises at back, mounts in the sky, stands still, shedding a pale light on the scene.*

Vladimir: At last! [Estragon gets up and goes toward at the edge of stage, straightens and contemplate the moon.] What are you doing?

Estragon: Pale for weariness. (45)

The descent from daylight into night reflects the character's emotional movement from excited anticipation to disappointed negation, whereas the moonlight projects their sorrowful solitude in the exhaustion of their body and mind. The light vanishes, and the darkness draws in. Yet, there is still no sign of Godot. Accordingly, they get increasingly tired: "Estragon: 'I'm tired of breathing.'" (68); "Vladimir: We were

beginning to weaken.” (69) While Estragon addresses his physical tiredness, Vladimir is concerned about his intellectual malaise:

Estragon: Use your intelligence, can't you?  
[Vladimir *uses his intelligence.*]  
Vladimir: [*Finally.*] I remain in the dark. (10)

Vladimir's reason becomes beclouded by the weariness of the long journey of waiting. He feels that he is no longer able to think clearly and intelligently, as if he has been thrown into chaos. Losing his sense of reason, he finds it hard to justify his struggling journey:

Estragon: It's not worthwhile now.  
[*Silence.*]  
Vladimir : No, it's not worth while now.  
[*Silence.*]  
Estragon: Well? Shall we go?  
Vladimir : Yes, let's go.  
[*They do no move.*] (47)

Here, it is interesting to notice the stage-direction: “*they do no move.*”(47) The silent and motionless moment support G.S. Fraser's argument that “Didi and Gogo are static pilgrims.” (100) As Fraser considers, the nature of the journey in Beckett's drama is static and contemplative, rather than mobile and active. On the other hand, the play displays a dynamic emotional movement beneath the apparently static situation.

The most persistent and challenging experience that pilgrims may have is restlessness; being away from home, nothing is as secure as it used to be. This sense of insecurity and unrest prevails over Beckett's characters, Estragon, and Vladimir. They are tramps on a road. Their nomadic life does not guarantee a good night's sleep. During the night, Estragon seems to be attacked by someone unidentified:

Vladimir: Who beat you? Tell me.  
Estragon: Another day done with.

Vladimir: Not yet.

Estragon: For me it's over and done with, no matter what happens. [*silence.*] (50)

Their wayfaring life threatens not only their physical safety, but their mental and emotional stability. They feel constantly anxious and fearful, finding it difficult to keep themselves calm:

Estragon: That would be too bad, really too bad.[*Pause*]. Wouldn't it, Didi, be really too bad? [*Pause.*] When you think of the beauty of way.[*Pause.*] And the the goodness of the wayfarers. [*Pause.Wheedling.*] Wouldn't is, Didi?

Vladimir: Calm yourself.

Estragon: [*Voluptuously*] Calm ... calm ... (8)

Their speech is repetitive and meditative:

Estragon: What do we do now?

Vladimir: While waiting.

Estragon: While waiting.

[*Silence.*]

Vladimir: We could do our exercises.

Estragon: Our movements.

Vladimir: Our elevations.

Estragon: Our relaxations.

Vladimir: Our elongations.

Estragon: Our relaxations.

Vladimir: To warm us up.

Estragon: To calm us down. (68)

These repetitive words create a contemplative mood, soothing their restless hearts. Simultaneously the words are disconcerting, kaleidoscopically fractured and echoing, revealing the hidden anxiety and anguish of these emotionally unstable characters. Their unstable state of mind clearly manifests itself in Vladimir's excessively active movement:

*Enter VLADIMIR agitatedly. He halts and looks long at the tree, then suddenly begins to move feverishly about the stage. He halts before the boots, picks one up, examines it, sniffs it, manifests disgust, puts it back carefully. Comes and goes. Halts extreme right and gazes into distance off, shading his eyes with his hand. Comes and goes. Halts extreme left, as before. Comes and goes. Halts suddenly and begins to sing loudly. (48)*

After his strenuously animated performance, singing and walking back and forth

around the stage, he is bound to be exhausted. Suddenly, “*he remains a moment silent and motionless.*” (49) When he becomes static, it is as though he has been physically and emotionally drained. When he stops his movement, it is as if he has died. After the brief motionless still moment of silence, however, he resumes his action, moving agitatedly across the stage. Vladimir’s agitated action demonstrates the state of his mind, which is intensely irritated, and uneasy. He is inexhaustibly restless:

Estragon: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly,  
since we are incapable of keeping silent.  
Vladimir: You’re right, we’re inexhaustible. (53)

Beckett himself had once suffered from a psychological illness, having frequent panic attacks and an irregular racing heart beat. In 1933, Beckett underwent psychotherapy in London. During his convalescence, he read a lot of books related to psychology and psychoanalysis. Psychologically, the characters show symptoms of a bipolar disorder. As revealed in their conversation, Estragon and Vladimir’s mood is rarely level, constantly shifting between high and low spirits. When their mood is at a peak, they get increasingly energetic, enjoying themselves thoroughly but in the next moment, they descend into depression: Vladimir: “Has it not long been straying in the night without end of the abyssal depths?” (72) Vladimir’s speech demonstrates that “the pain is deep but unfathomable.” (Bryden 149) It is as if he plunges into a bottomless pit. Vladimir’s depression reflects the disintegration of his selfhood. The dramatic shift of his mood demonstrates his disharmony of mind between expectation and fulfilment. He is restless because what he is desperately hoping and waiting for has not yet been fulfilled. The disunity between the wish and its realization destroys his peace of mind and creates formidable psychological distress:

Estragon : What do you expect, you always wait till the last moment.

Vladimir: [*Musingly.*] The last moment ... [*He meditates.*]

Hope deferred maketh the something sick, who said that? (2)

As their hope is indefinitely deferred, it pains them to the point of sickness. Life, with an unfulfilled or unobtainable hope, makes them suffer.

Their affliction is metaphysical as much as psychological. They waver because of their spiritual emptiness: “there’s no lack of void.” (W.G.57) This sense of a void addresses their poverty of spirit, which denotes insecurity, fear, and anxiety. The spiritual vacuum makes it difficult for them to stand still. From a religious perspective, their perpetual restlessness is caused by the uncertainty of Redemption. Spiritually, they are in a state of limbo, as Peter Boxall explains:

Gogo and Didi wait for salvation from the doubt-ridden condition of living, in a barren limbo in which the meaning of our lives is hidden from us, but even during this uncertain wait the play maintains a moral structure. (16)

In this “barren limbo,” Didi and Gogo are waiting for redemption without much sense of certainty. The anxiety about salvation makes it hard for the characters to relax.

### **The Pilgrimage Experience (iii) Compassion**

The pilgrimage experience reveals something embedded within the common heart of humanity; strong feelings of love, human-kindness, unity, and brotherhood. During a religious journey, pilgrims meet various people with different social and national backgrounds. Despite the diversity of the participants, pilgrims move closer to each other by supporting one another to overcome the challenges of the journey. Just as on a pilgrimage, the hardship of the journey on the road brings Beckett’s two main characters closer. As Peter Boxall has written:

Didi and Gogo are bound to each other by something that it is not absurd to call charity. They treat each other with consideration and compunction. Their odd relationship, always tugging away from each other, but always drawn together again, is among other things an emblem of marriage. (15)

Didi and Gogo, Boxall suggests, are bound by charity. They like an old married couple, build a lasting relationship throughout life's tough journey:

Estragon: How long have we been together all the time now?

Vladimir: I don't know. Fifty years perhaps.

Estragon: Do you remember the day I threw myself into the Rhone? ...

You fished me out. (47)

The incident when Estragon almost kills himself in the river highlights the hardship of their journey. At the same time, the story expresses the strong companionship between Estragon and Vladimir who saved his friend's life. Nonetheless, as their journey on the road continues interminably their body and mind begins to weary and they get on each other's nerves; they become unsupportive of one another. Accordingly, Estragon suggests they separate:

Estragon: Wait.

Vladimir: I'm cold!

Estragon: Wait! [*He moves away from Vladimir.*] I wonder if we wouldn't have been better off alone, each one for himself. [*He crosses the stage and sits down on the mound.*] We weren't made for the same road. (47)

Although they consider it would be better for them to go their own way, they quickly reconcile again after only a short period of separation:

Vladimir: Come here till I embrace you ...

Estragon: Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me!

Vladimir: Did I ever leave you?

Estragon: You let me go.

Vladimir: Look at me. [*Estragon does not raise his head. Violently.*]

Will you look at me!

[*Estragon raises his head. They look long at each other, then suddenly embrace, clapping each other on the back.*] (49-50)

Their long gaze at each other signifies their silent understanding of their inner pain. It also shows their mutual agreement on the fact that they are inseparable after all. The

unshakeable solidarity between them is enforced by the resolution that together they will continue their journey to the end.

While they are supporting each other, Vladimir also expresses his concern about the suffering of others: “Vladimir: Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now?”(83) Vladimir’s life cannot be worse than others. Yet, he is deeply compassionate towards those who suffer. His concern for others, however, is questioned by Cormier and Pallister:

although the characters do express concern, their concern is not genuine, and this lack of a true sense of responsibility only manifest the solitude of each of the characters, who are not really concerned with others but are, rather, preoccupied with their own egos. (92)

As Cormier and Pallister suggest, Estragon and Vladimir have a tendency to be absorbed in their own misery. Vladimir’s concern, however, does sound convincing.

His sincere intention to help others is delivered in the following statement:

Vladimir: The tiger bounds to the help of his congeners without the least reflection, or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets. (72)

Vladimir’s speech suggests that responding to someone crying for help is an innate natural reaction. His altruistic action, detached from his selfish concern sounds sincere. This is tied to the essential Christian value of charity that G.S. Fraser finds in the play: “Vladimir’s kindness to his friend, and the two tramps’ mutual interdependence are seen as symbols of Christian charity.” (14) To this comment, Peter Boxall adds: “It is Estragon and Vladimir’s ‘charity,’ their fundamental humanity, that sets them aside from Pozzo and Lucky, and forms the moral fabric of the play.” (16) Estragon and Vladimir’s relationship is preserved in the moral structure of humanity. This distinguishes them from Pozzo and Lucky, whose relationship is like an impersonal business.



The compassionate friendship between Estragon and Vladimir is reflected in their relationship with God(ot):

Estragon: [*Chews, swallows.*] I'm asking you if we're tied.

Vladimir: Tied?

Estragon: Tied.

Vladimir: How do you mean, tied?

Estragon: Down.

Vladimir: But to whom. By whom?

Estragon: To your man.

Vladimir: To Godot? Tied to Godot? (13)

They are unsure to what extent their lives are connected with Godot. Yet, despite their doubt, and anxiety, they still try hard to make sure that they are tied to Godot, as Cormier and Pallister state: "that they are tied to Godot is evident in their inability to cease their waiting for him." (91) Their persistent waiting manifests itself as their faithful relationship with God. As much as the two lonely travellers are inseparable from one another, they remain faithfully in God(ot).

### ***Waiting as a pilgrimage in search of fulfilment***

"Que voulez-vous?" (W.G.56)

Beckett's question, what do you expect? It does not demand a logical explanation. It expresses humanity's hankering for something that they have not yet found. Beckett's characters are expecting something unknown, mysterious, and supernatural. Nonetheless, the level of their imagination is so limited that they struggle to picture how their life would be transformed by Godot's arrival:

Vladimir: I'm curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we'll take it or leave it.

Estragon: What exactly did we ask him for?

Vladimir: Were you not there?

Estragon: I can't have been listening.

Vladimir: Oh ... nothing very definite ...

Estragon: And what did he reply?

Vladimir: That he'd see.

Estragon: That he couldn't promise anything. (10-11)

As it is implied, their intention and purpose of waiting is ambiguous and uncertain. They cannot articulate clearly what they expect from their waiting, how their waiting will end, or what will happen at end of their waiting: "nothing very definite." Interestingly, this uncertainty invites them to trust and pray:

Vladimir : Let's wait and see what he says.

Estragon : Who?

Vladimir : Godot.

Estragon: Good idea ... What exactly did we ask him for?

...

Vladimir: Oh ... nothing very definite.

Estragon: A kind of prayer.

Vladimir: Precisely.

Estragon: A vague supplication. (10)

Waiting itself is "a kind of prayer," entailing longing and trust. A prayer consists of three characteristics: praise, thanksgiving, and petition. In the case of Beckett's characters, their prayer is closer to a quest, rather than adoration or gratitude. Yet, they cannot determine what to pray for. They are incapable of articulating their longing in words. Accordingly, their prayer of supplication is, according to Estragon, "vague". While they are desperately longing for something, they have no clear idea of what they really want. Consequently, their minds become bewildered and troubled, when they face this most simple but crucial question: *Que voulez-vous?*

This enquiry echoes back to the medieval question: "*Quem Quaeritis?*" (whom do you seek?) This Latin phrase is addressed in the medieval liturgical drama, *The Visit to the Sepulchre*. The following four lines are excerpted from the play-text in Latin:

*Interrogatio. Quem quaeritis in sepulchro, o Christicolae?*

*Responsio. Jesum Nazarenum crucifixum, o caelicolae.*

*Angeli. Non est hic; surrexit, sicut praedixerat. Ite, nuntiate quia surrexit de sepulchro*

Translation:

*Question [by the Angels]: Whom do ye seek in the sepulcher; O followers of Christ?*

*Answer [by the Marys]: Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified, O heavenly ones.*

*The Angels: He is not here; he is risen, just as he foretold. Go, announce that he is risen from the sepulchre.* By John Gassner, editor, *Medieval and Tudor Drama*.

This medieval Mystery play is based on the Gospels of Mark 16:1-8; Matthew 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-8; John 20:1-13; Peter 9-10. The biblical story recounts the Resurrection of Christ, with the three Marys, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the sister of Lazarus, finding Jesus' tomb empty. The play begins at the empty tomb with no one knowing of Christ's Resurrection. Similarly, Beckett's play is set in an equally empty place with God(ot) supposedly dead or, at least, absent. The barren mound that dominates Beckett's stage resembles the empty sepulchre of Christ in the Mystery play. Just as the three Marys make their journey to the tomb of Christ in order to venerate and adore their lovely one, Beckett's characters roam the cemetery-like setting, searching for someone that they have lost. Here, contemplating upon John's Gospel 20:1: "it was very early on the first day of the week and still dark, when Mary of Magdalene came to the tomb," an interesting question is raised by Meister Eckhart, the medieval German theologian, philosopher, and mystic. Eckhart questions about the reason why Mary remains close to in the tomb of the son of God. A similar question can be addressed to Beckett's characters: what are they doing in the place, where "nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful?" (W.G. 34) Their waiting for Godot appears as absurd as Mary's searching for Jesus in the grave: it seems a senseless act. Concerning Mary's seemingly incomprehensible visit, Eckhart explains:

she had lost God twice, living on the cross and dead in the grave, and so she was afraid that if she went away from the grave, she would lose the grave as well. For if she had lost the grave, she would have nothing left at all. (252)

God is dead on the Cross. Yet, Mary does not know how to deal with this; she is inconsolable and her mind is restless. Out of her desperation, she visits the grave, which held the body of Christ. Eckhart goes on to fully illustrate Mary's state of mind:

For she well knew that none could get to heaven before Christ himself had gone there, and her soul must have a resting place somewhere. She desired that her soul should dwell in the grave and her body by the grave: her soul in it and – because she had a hope that God had broken forth out of man, and something of God had remained in the grave. As if I had held an apple for some time in my hand, if I put it down, something would remain such as a slight odour. Thus she hoped that something of God had remained in the grave. (252)

For Mary, it is difficult to believe that God is actually dead. Out of this desperation, she visits the grave; the only place that she feels close to God is the grave, as it bears Christ's flesh. Similarly, Mary's irrepressible spiritual longing is shared by Beckett's characters. For them, God appears to be dead. Nonetheless they cannot simply forget Him, as if God is no longer relevant to them. The idea of God in Beckett's theatre resonates both linguistically and symbolically. Their nostalgic memory of God makes the characters stay at a dusty grey mound. In the middle of the mound, there is a reminder of God. There is the leafless tree. The tree recalls the wooden cross of Christ's crucifixion. As the tree is leafless, it also signifies the death of Life, or of God. However, just as the tree will flower again, the crucifix without a figure of Christ suggests His Resurrection. Such is the pain of loss in Beckett's characters, they are blind to the fact that God(ot) is already with them, and does not need to be found. They are like Mary failing to recognize the resurrected Christ.

*The Visit to the Spectre* was performed during the Easter Vigil Mass in the mid-tenth century. Since the early Christians were unsure of the exact time of Christ's resurrection, they estimated that it might be sometime around midnight

before the Sabbath. Similarly, Beckett's characters also guess that Godot might arrive sometime around Saturday evening:

Estragon: You're sure it was this evening?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon : That we were to wait.

Vladimir : He said Saturday. [*Pause.*] I think. (15)

Here, the Saturday evening suggests the Christian allusion to the night before Easter. This dramatic time delivers a complex emotional, and spiritual movement; from grief at the death of Christ to the anticipation and hope for His return. It is a night of mourning, watching, and waiting. This dramatic situation is similar to the Good Friday; coincidentally Beckett was born on Good Friday. Beckett's stage is empty of any sacred images or symbols, just like a Catholic church on Good Friday. According to the Roman Catholic rite, on Good Friday, all statues, icons and images of saints and the crucifix inside the church are hidden, covered with cloths. Good Friday night is like:

The night into which all familiar objects disappear, where something is there but nothing is visible, the experience of darkness, the density of the void where lucid objectivity collapses into a swarming of points. This is the night of insomnia ... denoting both watchfulness and wakefulness, a vigil, a night-watch, but also the state of being on the brink or verge. (Critchley 180)

The vigil night before Easter is essentially about the death and the Passion of Christ. In commemoration of loss and suffering, the night is filled with the "density of the void", where human existence is "on the brink or verge". This spiritual darkness, where an individual plunges into the depth of nothingness, is expressed in Vladimir's speech: "Has it not long been straying in the night without end of the abyssal depths?" (72) In the fathomless darkness of the abyss, Vladimir is approached by the Boy; the messenger informs him that Godot is soon to arrive. This corresponds to the angel who interceded in the Mystery play, filling the Marys with hope. Beckett's Boy, like

the angel, offers new hope that God(ot) is still alive.

The generic conventions of the medieval drama make them difficult to categorize. Roger Savage suggests they are:

a 'divine comedy' so to speak: not a matter of laughs but of something fitting the time-honoured comedic pattern of a movement from darkness to light, from conflict to resolution – in this case from the wretchedness of the Marys looking for their cruelly crucified master to the moment when all the monastery's bells sound out together. (166)

As Savage argues, the dramatic pattern, leading to the happy resolution of the Marys' spiritual turmoil is more typical of a comedic structure. In the case of *Waiting for Godot*, there is no such a happy ending explicitly. Unlike the Marys, Beckett's characters are still waiting to encounter their master. Their pilgrimage has not yet reached its final destination; either God(ot) or death. Beckett's play is closer to a tragic comedy than a divine comedy: in the English edition, it is subtitled as "Tragicomedy." As the subtitle signifies, the play is simultaneously tragic and comic; Beckett delivers his tragic vision of life in a black comedy.

## 9. Tragicomedy

Estragon: Well? Shall we go?  
Vladimir: Pull on your trousers.  
Estragon: What?  
Vladimir: Pull on your trousers.  
Estragon: You want me to pull off my trousers?  
Vladimir: Pull ON your trousers.  
Estragon:[ *Realizing his trousers are down.*] True. [*He pulls up his trousers.*]  
Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?  
Estragon: Yes, let's go.  
          [*They do not move.*]  
CURTAIN. (87)

Like Estragon's trousers, the characters keep falling down both physically and emotionally, exhausted by waiting. Being weary of the endless swing between anticipation and frustration, they consider giving up waiting, but they do not move. Despite all their continual defeats, they have not given up yet. The tenacity and stubbornness of their irrational striving is tragic. At the same time, it is comical in the sense that it is pointless, and mechanical. They wait because they are incapable of walking away from their predicament. This tragic sense of impasse is expressed in the manner of a black comedy.

The laughter generated in Beckett's theatre is not just superficially cheerful. It is an unhappy laughter with a mixture of "the bitter, the hollow, and the mirthless":

The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. Not good! Not true! Well well. But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down the snout – Haw! – so. It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy. (*Watt* 48)

The bitter laughter occurs in the scene where Pozzo treats Lucky as if he were an inanimate object. Knowing that it is unethical to exploit a fellow human being like

that, we feel uncomfortable, yet still laugh at them. The hollow laughter is created by the dialogue, loaded with a set of meaningless nonsense words. The verbal chaos is amusing, but leaves us with a bitter taste of emptiness afterwards. The mirthless laughter carries a subtle sense of sadness and there is unhappiness beneath the surface of the comical presentation. Beckett's idea of "the highest joke" mixed with joy and sorrow recalls Frederick Lumley's saying: "the more you laugh, the deeper the tragedy." (22) It will be further examined; in what extent it is feasible to read *Waiting for Godot* as a tragedy and comedy.

In reading this play as a tragedy, it is instructive to compare the play to the Classical legend of Sisyphus. Before being condemned to carry his rock to the mountain-top for all eternity, Sisyphus was an astute and cunning figure, often challenging authority and the gods, hence the punishment. The endless toil and frustration is similar to the unsolvable situation of Beckett's characters. Just as the rebuked Sisyphus can never accomplish his task, Vladimir and Estragon are stuck with the unachievable task of waiting; which is equally impossible for them to proceed with or withdraw from. The tragic impasse in both stories is created by their estrangement from gods/Godot. The mythical Sisyphus is alienated from his gods through his pride. Overly confident of his own cleverness, he tries to manipulate the divine. Consequently his gods abandon him to be a dark, absurd world, where he is destined to remain forever without any consolation or hope. For Beckett's characters, however, there is no tragic fall. They are already at the nadir, with no power, knowledge or status in society. Moreover, there is no explanation of how they got separated from Godot, and why they are tormented by Godot's absence. In the absence of detailed information concerning the characters' predicament, the play



appears to be simply a nonsense-disaster, rather than tragic.

In Albert Camus' famous account of Sisyphus, the legendary figure is a tragic hero. Camus explains Sisyphus is fully aware of "the whole extent of his wretched condition." (117) He is well aware of the full magnitude of his predicament where he is destined to fail. Despite this acknowledgement, he resigns himself to his unfortunate fate without resistance. Camus goes on to say Sisyphus "is superior to his fate" (117), and that he is capable of suffering. Sisyphus takes complete responsibility for his transgression against the gods, and carries its consequences with his full strength: "he is tragic, and stronger than his rock." (Ibid.) It is difficult to find such sublime pathos in Beckett's characters. They are unwilling to suffer.

Cormier and Pallister argue:

they [Estragon and Vladimir] do not experience profound suffering ... the anguish of Estragon and Vladimir is equally fleeting. We see it in Estragon when he says such things as "I'm unhappy" and "I'm tired" which reflect his boredom and impatience. Vladimir's anguish is seen at moments when a lull in the *divertissements* occurs. (102)

The characters' unhappiness appears to have not to be profound:

Vladimir : What's the matter with you?

Estragon: I'm unhappy.

Vladimir: Not really! Since when?

Estragon: I'd forgotten.

Vladimir: Extraordinary the tricks that memory plays! (43)

Estragon's discontentment appears to be like a temporary mood that will quickly pass away. Estragon cannot quite remember how long he has been unhappy, because he is "a creature of the moment." (Cormier and Pallister 40) Estragon often gets confused, and forgets past events. Estragon who lives life from moment to moment is incapable of relating his situation to a broader temporal context. Vladimir, unlike Estragon, tries to comprehend and relate his current state of depression to past experience.

However, it is only a short reflection as he is quickly distracted by Estragon's preoccupation with his boot. Cormier and Pallister argue that they are "nontragic because they do not suffer to any significant degree." (102) Beckett's characters are reluctant sufferers. They refuse to know how miserable they are:

Vladimir: Say, I am happy.

Estragon: I am happy.

Vladimir: So am I.

Estragon: So am I. (55)

Like children, they talk light-heartedly, as if they are trying to convince themselves that nothing is wrong. By telling themselves that everything is fine, and they are happy, they try to remove the depression that is so deep set in their minds. Their inner pain is disguised in their cheerful talk. In doing so, they make the unbearable bearable for themselves. The numb repetition of the sentence, "I am happy," distracts them from the truth. As language creates a fictional world, their saying "I am happy" elicits the illusion that they are actually happy. It is as though they "will to live, not to suffer." (*Proust* 43) Despite appearances, there is a profoundly tragic struggle.

### ***Tragic Impasse***

In tragedy the man is caught in the wheels of his part, his fate, he may be torn asunder, He may be killed, but the resistant, integral soul in him is not destroyed ... Tragedy is ... within the soul of man ... There must be a supreme struggle. (Lawrence 9)

The supreme struggle of tragedy is evident in Beckett's play. In appearance, Beckett's protagonist laughs at his misery. In truth, however, Vladimir is fully conscious of his fathomless despair, as he speaks: "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries [He *listens*.]" (83) In between birth and

death, there is a dark hole of emptiness, which waits to be filled. Time, however, propels one towards decay, not allowing the void to be filled with something meaningful. The hollow space resonates with cries of despair. Accordingly, Vladimir and Estragon have begun to ponder the prospect of suicide. Yet, they are not yet ready to end their lives:

Pozzo: I don't seem to be able ... [*Long hesitation*] ... to depart.  
Estragon: Such is life. (40)

This dialogue illuminates humanity's strong attachment to life: "however great their despair, they prefer life to death." (Cormier and Pallister 84) No matter how painfully life is experienced, one cannot simply depart from it. It is as though "man is condemned to live: he must continue." (Ibid. 85) Although Beckett's characters choose to remain in life's battle, they cannot fully commit themselves according to their decision. They are constantly tempted by the possibility of suicide. Suspended between life and death, they are unable to decide whether they should proceed or retreat from, the journey of life. Stuck in this impossible situation, Vladimir questions:

what are we doing here, that is the question, And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come – Or for night to fall. (72)

Interestingly, Vladimir's speech "to wait for Godot or for night" recalls Hamlet's famous soliloquy:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis Nobler in the mind to suffer  
The Slings and Arrows of outrageous Fortune,  
Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them: to die, to sleep  
No more; and by a sleep, to say we end  
The heart-ache, and the thousand Natural shocks  
That Flesh is heir to? 'Tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wished. To die to sleep ... (Act 3, Scene I, Line 58-66)

Like Hamlet, Vladimir faces a tragic impasse: whether it is worthier to endure life's trouble, or to end it. For Hamlet, it at least remains a question with a choice, whereas for Vladimir is a bold statement; for Vladimir, there is no alternative choice but to endure life. Unlike Hamlet, Vladimir feels that he is too powerless to make any definite decision over his life and death. In another sense, Vladimir acknowledges that he is no longer in charge of his destiny, as Walter Kaufmann notes: "Indeed, the tragedy begins with the old saying that you cannot judge a man's life till he is dead." (116) In this situation where the final outcome is unknowable, the only thing that he can do is wait. He knows that there is no clear resolution, except waiting. Waiting signifies loss of will and freedom, and have, according to Günther Anders, "lost their will power to decide not to go on, their freedom to end it all." (143) From this perspective, waiting itself means suspension or resignation of their will and freedom. It is as though the characters are paralyzed by fear, incapable of acting, but waiting. Waiting becomes a passive suffering.

### ***Life as Habit***

"Breathing is habit. Life is habits." (*Proust* 19)

Beckett considers that life, as an unending chain of days, is little more than habit.

This idea is further developed by Vladimir's words:

All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which – how shall I say – which may at sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit. You may say it is to prevent our reason from foundering. (72)

Vladimir's speech implies that they are living and waiting only from irrational habit; there is no meaningful pattern in the habit. Even when our rational mind is convinced of the idea that our life is meaninglessly long and arduous, and therefore not worth

fighting for, we still choose to live. It is because “we get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking,” suggests Camus. (6) Life is beyond any advanced intellectual principle. It is a primal instinct, and habit. The habit prevents us from thinking or rationalizing the complexity of life. Accordingly, we are able to go on living even in quite hopeless circumstances. This consideration of life as a habit is reflected in Beckett’s theatre, where the characters, in Anders’s estimation, “go on living merely because they happen to exist, and because existence doesn’t know of any other alternative but to exist.” (143) Borrowing from physics, this interpretation recalls the Law of Inertia, where any physical object has a tendency to resist against change either in a state of motion or at rest. Likewise, the habitual nature of life resists change because change contains certain elements of loss and unpredictable danger. Beckett’s characters prefer to remain within “the security of habit.” (Cormier and Pallister 41):

Vladimir: Well? What do we do?

Estragon: Don’t let’s do anything. It’s safer. (10)

They feel secure in the regularity of the habit of life because it makes them less sensitive to the reality of their desolate life:

Vladimir: The air is full of our cries. [*He listens.*]

But habit is a great deadener. (83)

In reference to Vladimir’s speech above, Cormier writes: “habit makes change difficult in part because it makes one less conscious of ennui as well as the more painful aspects of life and death, for habit can be a great deadener.” (42) Habit prevents one from being fully conscious of life’s pain. Being automatically carried along by the routines of his daily life, Vladimir avoids suffering. Habit lets sense be numbed; it makes one emotionally and cognitively impotent. In other words, for

Vladimir, habit vetoes suffering, as Beckett expresses: “the will to live, the will not to suffer, Habit, having recovered from its momentary paralysis, has laid the foundation of its evil and necessary structure.” (*Proust* 43) While there are certain anti-tragic characteristics in Beckett’s play, there is also something profoundly tragic in it.

### ***Tragic Action***

“Tragedy imitates an immutably serious action.” (Gallagher 216).

Concerning this subject matter, a question occurs: is there such “an immutably serious action” in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*? Martin Esslin claims the play “does not tell a story; it explores a static situation.” (*Absurd* 45) Esslin’s assertion suggests that the play presents no action other than a motionless human condition. Obviously, Beckett’s world is neither as dynamic nor dangerous as that of the classical world of tragedy. Since nothing serious happens through action, it gives an impression that Beckett’s theatre depicts nothing but a static and desolate state of human life. “Action presupposes a reasonably autonomous self and a world of intelligible causality,” states Ronan McDonald, adding “since neither is available in Beckett’s plays, there is little action on his stage.” (32-33) Neither the characters nor the dramatic situation in Beckett’s play appears to be logical or reasonable. In the absence of clear reason and causality, action seems to be absent. However McDonald goes on to argue:

Is ‘waiting’ itself not a sort of action? To be sure the notion of action is here extended into an area previously deemed ineffective in the theatre. Inertia, punctuated with inconsequential dialogue, sustains a large part of the play. But ... it is clearly not the case that *nothing* happens here ... a range of movement and activity takes place: playing with boots, exchanging hats, trouser falling down, characters running on and off. Moreover the conversation and physical

exchanges between the two leads constitute a sort of dramatic activity ... there is action in this play. (33)

McDonald's consideration of Beckett's waiting as action is further explicated by Mary Bryden, and Paul E. Corcoran. Bryden writes: that "waiting can never be entirely static, since circumstances and individuals are constantly on the move." (28) Correspondingly, William E. Gruber notes: "the art we are watching is not pictorial but theatrical, one which includes movements, gestures, bodies, moving in time and moving through space." (40) Beckett's art, Gruber insists, is a moving performance not a static picture. This argument is supported by Beckett's statement in *Proust*: "we are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are others, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday." (13) Although Beckett feels frustrated that circumstances allow very little progress, he conceives an individual in constant change. Corresponding to the argument of McDonald, and Bryden, Paul E. Corcoran also asserts: "waiting is not submissive inaction, a lacuna in social time, or a psychopathic fixation upon a frozen present." (518) Waiting is not just a passive inaction; it is "to be awake" as Corcoran states. (517) Waiting is a full-time occupation, demanding strenuous physical and mental activity; to attend, to be awake, to watch, to await patiently, and to maintain anticipation. In developing this argument, Corcoran introduces the meaning of waiting in a specific context. To wait in hunting, or combat, for instance, is "to keep watch, to lie in wait, to stalk a prey, to take by surprise." (517) Accordingly, Corcoran concludes: "waiting, it seems, is an action that may be done well or badly." (511)

Waiting itself is an action, involving various physical and emotional movements. In the play, the characters continue to think, talk, eat, sleep, sing, dance and play games, while waiting. Waiting also creates a vigorous emotional oscillation

from hope to despair. In this sense, waiting is a dynamic action. Action in tragedy necessarily accompanies struggle and passion. In Beckett's play, however, action delivers a sense of emptiness and insignificance. Most of the actions performed by the characters are mechanical and repetitive; moving constantly back and forth on stage, eating carrots, playing with boots or hats, and repeating the same joke, and senseless words. They seem to be trivial, detached from any seriousness of meaning. Nonetheless, things are not always as they appear to be. Waiting itself is one of the most formidable ordeals.

### ***Waiting as a trial of time***

Waiting is passion, standing firm in a test of time. Writing on the play, Murray Watts states: "it is not about God or about morality, but it is certainly about passing the time in the absence of these." (14) How to pass time is the essential matter for Beckett's characters. Time in the play has two dimensions: both static and fluid.

"Time has stopped." (W.G. 29)

This expression implies that time has lost history. For Beckett's characters, neither past nor future are certain. This is closely related with their defective memory. They often forget things that happened in the past; they are unsure of where they were, and whom they met the previous day. The faltering memory can be intentional rather than natural or accidental. Their past is too disappointing and bitter to recall. However, there is nothing to be remembered in their life, because "nothing happens":

Pozzo: You see my memory is defective.

[*Silence.*]

Estragon: In the meantime nothing happens.

Pozzo: You find it tedious?



Estragon: Somewhat. (31)

Vivian Mercier remarks that:

[Beckett] has achieved a theoretical impossibility – a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps the audience glued to their seats. What's more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice. (29)

This witty interpretation opens the possibility that Beckett's play is not simply nihilistic negation of action or meaning, as Peter Boxall writes: it "is not a purely negative statement, but can be read as suggestion that something happened – the thing that happened was nothing." (13) Something could have happened, but it was just too insignificant to be remembered. Their memory is blocked and fettered by the dullness of their life. Their daily life is monotonously uneventful, boring and insignificant; linear time carries no significant events for them. This recalls Beckett's statement in *Proust*:

A life all in length, a sequence of dislocation and adjustment, where neither mystery nor beauty is sacred, where all, except the adamant columns of his enduring boredom, has been consumed in the torrential solvent of the years, a life so protracted in the past and so meaningless in the future, so utterly bereft of any individual and permanent necessity, that his death, now or tomorrow or in a year or in ten, would be a termination but not a conclusion. (67-8)

When there is neither myth nor blissful beauty, time has lost its magic and significance. Likewise, Beckett's heroes feel that there is not much difference between yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Time is pointlessly protracted, as if "time here has become something like stagnant mush." (Anders 146) They feel that they are trapped in the "stagnant mush" of time where "nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful." (W.G. 34) When time brings no improvement for the situation, waiting itself is an unbearable torture, as Vladimir expresses: "we wait. We are bored. [He *throws up his hand*.] No, protest, we are bored to death, there's no

denying it.” (73) In order to kill their boredom, the characters engage in various activities, like playing, crying, laughing, sleeping, and talking. These activities help them to pass the time. Otherwise, time has a tendency to become stagnant in Günther Anders’s term: “by simulating activity, we try to make that time pass which otherwise would threaten to stagnate.” (147) In this stagnant time, neither past, nor future is clear. All that is left for them is the present moment, as Anders continues to: “with the future, and the past so decisively thrown into question, the only thing that seems to retain its solidity is the present.” (38) In the midst of the uncertainty of time, the present appears to be the only certitude that they have. This interpretation demands further developing through a philosophical and theological approach.

For there were no days, and nights and months and years before the heaven was created ...They were all parts of time, and the past and future are categories of time that we ourselves have created and that we attribute, wrongly and unthinkingly, to the eternal essence. We say ‘was,’ is ‘will be,’ but the truth is that only ‘is’ can be used in any adequate fashion. (*Timaeus* 37e)

Plato’s statement suggests that one can only properly talk about the immediacy of existence in the present tense; the present is the only reality, whereas the past and future are illusion. Like this ancient philosopher, the modern philosopher, Albert Camus emphasises the importance of the present actuality of life. In Camus’ view, “*being* is a full-time occupation, an existence in an eternal *present*.” (Corcoran 507) What matters to him is to live an intense life in the present tense, free from any illusionary worries of the future. Interestingly, Camus’ emphasis on the present echoes Christ’s teaching: “Do not worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Matthew 6:34) Murray Watts addresses this in *Christianity and the Theatre*:

The prophet, in the biblical sense, is not simply someone who predicts the future, but someone who accurately interprets the present. In this sense, theatre has a

prophetic role in society. (30)

As with Christianity, Watts insists, theatre primarily is concerned with the present:

theatre is concerned with the present tense. It is always present, even if dealing with a wreckage of past errors or the pressure of the unknown: it is always about people living their lives, reacting to their fate or their predicament. (30)

From Watts' perspective, theatre depicts our lives in the present tense; our past and future are also reflected in the present mirror of theatre. This concept of theatre as a vision of the present is convincing because action in the theatre always takes place in the present tense on stage. This characteristic of theatre can be linked with Christianity, as Watts continues to explain:

To live now ... Christ adjured his followers to live in the present – vigorously and realistically for the day at hand ... the immediacy of God, the 'present tense' of the spiritual world. They [Saints] did not allow worries to cloud their vision of a God who stood right in the midst of the hours, minutes, and seconds of daily living. (30)

Living a life "vigorously and realistically" in the present moment requires passion and focus. To exist fully "now" means giving full attention to the present. The intensity of passion is assessed by an individual's response to the 'here and now.' However, it is debatable how much Beckett's characters are engaged with their "now." As their disorganized dialogue and action demonstrate, their minds are often distracted by various things, from something ridiculously trivial to serious matters; from carrots and turnips to life and death. Despite their constant distraction, there is a fixed moment of intense passion. It is a waiting point. In waiting, past and future are merged into a single present moment. The present time bears all the painful memories of the past, and anxiety for the future. In their "now" of endless pain, they feel as if "time has stopped." (W.G. 29) Nonetheless, independent of the characters' subjective experience of timeless time, the objective reality of time still runs:

Time flows again already. The sun will set, the moon will rise, and we away ... from here. (W.G. 69)

Time is in flux, as Hans Urs von Balthasar states: “the future is continually coming and the present is continually going” (98). Here, Balthasar questions whether there is such a thing as ‘my time’:

‘my’ time; it is not like an external medium in which I move; rather it is given to me as my very own mode of existence. And yet at the same time it is withdrawn from me, since I have no control over my entire past and future, except from the single, here-and-now vantage point of my present. (97)

From Balthasar’s perspective, it is illusionary to think that time is something that one can possess, and so have control over it. In reality, we have very little power over time; neither past nor future are within our reach. The only time that is available to us is the present moment. Yet, the present itself never stands still in Robert Barron analysis: “the present slips inevitably and irredeemably into the past, leaving us with only memories and impression.” (86) The continuous stream of time causes fear and anxiety. In the play, Pozzo conceives time as a curse:

Pozzo: Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It’s abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (82)

Pozzo’s speech suggests that time is finite, and has no hope beyond it: “for Pozzo time has become empty.” (Via 35) Accordingly, Pozzo conceives time as an abominable torture and curse, bringing nothing but the decay of the body. Pozzo’s speech about the inevitability of life’s decline prompts Mary Bryden to declare that: “an allied recognition of deterioration and death as an inevitable corollary of lies at the heart of Beckett’s writing.” (103) This deeply bleak perspective of existence in decline is further expressed by Beckett himself: “the individual is the seat of a

constant process of decantation.” (*Proust* 13) This suggests Beckett’s bleak perspective on the individual life: a life without hope or transcendental purpose is a prison rather than liberation: the human spirit is imprisoned in the finite life, full of suffering and death. Pozzo is enclosed within his finite body. For Pozzo, time is a closed system, where he is trapped, unable to step beyond the boundary to eternity. This sense of impasse, trapped in time is further delivered by Beckett:

There is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from tomorrow, nor from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us or been deformed by us ... Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. (*Proust* 13)

Even when time in its continuous motion attacks us with one calamity after another, we cannot do much about it; time itself is unstoppable. He feels helplessness over the flow of time.

Beckett’s insecurity is fundamentally intertwined with his fear of death. In death, we are ultimately alone, and no one can help us. This fear of dying alone is expressed by Vladimir: “In an instant all will vanish and we’ll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness.” (73) Vladimir’s speech reveals his fear of the passage of time, which leads to the inevitable, death. He feels that he is sinking helplessly in time; Vladimir acknowledges, he will soon disappear into the void. For Vladimir, time is despair, which drives him to a vanishing point, removing any trace of his existence gradually, and completely. The flow of time, which causes fear and anxiety, is coming to a halt “time has stopped.” (W.G. 29) In the stillness of time, the characters hope to find peace from their restlessly fleeting lives, as Esslin notes:

Still Vladimir and Estragon live in hope: they wait for Godot, whose coming will bring the flow of time to a stop... They are hoping to be saved from the evanescence and instability of illusion of the time, and to find peace and permanence outside of it. (*Absurd* 85-6)

## ***Waiting as a trial of faith***

*Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage;  
yes, wait for the Lord! (Psalm 27[26]:13-14)*

Just as the Psalm encourages Christians to persevere in waiting for the Lord, Beckett's characters try hard to keep their loyalty in waiting for Godot. In both cases, waiting presupposes absence. Ironically this absence of Godot or the Lord strengthens their followers' faith, as Günther Anders says: "it is precisely Godot's non-arrival which keeps them waiting for him and their faith in him, alive." (145) Waiting itself demands enormous patience, perseverance, and faith. Although both Christians and Beckett's characters persevere in their waiting to attain the promised salvation of their masters, there is an important distinction between them, as Dan O. Via, Jr suggests: "Estragon and Vladimir wait for one whom they do not know, where as Christian man waits for one whom he does know." (37) As Via states, there is no explicit indication about Godot's identity. Who is Godot? On this mysterious character, who never even appears on stage, Cormier and Pallister write:

the identity of Godot can no more be ascertained than can that of the other four characters ... if Godot is God, the messenger boy is his angel; whereas if Godot is merely a wealthy and powerful man, then the messenger and his brother are Godot's servants and errand boys. However, if Godot is a floating symbol for man's hope (false or otherwise), then the messenger boy is whatever comes man's way to shore up this hope. (36)

Godot could be a religious god or a rich and influential man in a mundane society, or simply a figment of pure fantasy and dream. In an existential sense, Godot is an embodiment of the absurdity, as Boxall states: "Godot appeared to initial audiences to depict absurdity and meaninglessness of life: it seemed to be a play that dramatised the collapse of meaning, language and belief." (10) From Boxall's perspective, Godot is not a person but a symbolical figure, representing "meaning,

language, and belief". As for the ambiguous nature of the character, Beckett himself says: "If I knew, I would have said so in the play." (qtd. in McDonald 29) Beckett's statement implies that Godot's identity is indefinable and symbolic. In this respect, Anders writes:

Godot can hardly be considered a figure in a realistic narrative...he has become a concept – an idea of promise and expectation ...*Waiting for Godot*, then is a play not about Godot, but about waiting. (43)

Echoing Anders, Esslin goes on to suggest:

Whether Godot is meant to suggest the intervention of a supernatural agency, or whether he stands for a mythical human being whose arrival is expected to change the station, or both of these possibilities combined, his exact nature is of secondary importance. The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting. (*Absurd* 50)

As both Anders and Esslin insist, the key subject matter in the play is waiting rather than Godot. So why does waiting matter?

To wait for someone that they hardly know anything about appears to be sheer madness: "their lives are a delusion." (Corcoran 513) Nonetheless, this seemingly irrational waiting carries a significantly tragic pathos. Waiting is a great ordeal, especially, in a situation where "nothing is definite." (W.G. 47) They do not know when Godot will come, where they are supposed to meet him and whether Godot actually exits:

Vladimir: [*Without anger.*] It's not certain.  
Estragon: No, nothing is certain. (47)

The uncertainty makes them insecure, and unstable, creating emotional turmoil, and spiritual trial, as Esslin notes: "In *Waiting for Godot*, the feeling of uncertainty it produces, the ebb and flow of this uncertainty – from the hope of discovering the identity of Godot to its repeated disappointment – are themselves the essence of the play." (*Absurd* 44) The uncertainty in the play produces emotional waves of hope and

despair.

Godot is a source of conflict, as much as a giver of hope. On one occasion, Didi and Gogo hear a human sound from a distance, and get excited that Godot is hopefully on his way. When they discover in the next moment that it is not Godot but Pozzo, their hearts sink with disappointment. When Godot's promise appears alien and unintelligible to the characters and to us, they grow weary of waiting. Yet, they refuse to give up their struggle. Their act of waiting for Godot is passion, surviving in spite of uncertainty. Of what, then, are Beckett's characters uncertain? For Vladimir, what challenges him the most is the uncertainty of salvation, as he himself implies:

Vladimir: how is it that of the four evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. The four of them were there-or thereabouts-and only one speaks of a thief being saved [*Pause.*] (4-5)

Of the Evangelists in the Bible, it is only St. Luke, who actually mentions the conversation between Christ on the cross and the two thieves. Accordingly, Vladimir ponders how the Gospels, if they contradict one another, can be trustworthy. Beckett through his protagonist expresses his doubt over the Bible's authenticity. As Michael Worton remarks: "Vladimir's commentary on the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion is indicative of the seriousness of Beckett's lifelong subversive meditation on the authority of the Bible." (76) When the authority of the Bible itself remains extremely dubious, Vladimir questions why he has to believe in Luke's Gospel rather than the others: "But all four were there. And only one speaks of a thief being saved Why believe him [Luke] rather than the others?" (5) On this speech, Cormier and Pallister write that "Vladimir also is expressing a profound reason for doubting that salvation will ever come about, even though (or perhaps because) salvation is his major



preoccupation.” (40) They are suggesting that Vladimir’s reason challenges his faith in salvation. It is reasonable for Vladimir to doubt about the validity of the Gospels’ truth, since they are not consistent. Despite Vladimir’s reasoned scepticism, he cannot dismiss the possibility of salvation. Redemption in Vladimir’s mind still remains a considerable possibility, if not a certainty:

Vladimir : Our Saviour. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved  
and the other ... [*He searches for the contrary of saved*] ... damned. (4)

Vladimir’s speech echoes St. Augustine’s saying: “Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned.” (qtd. in Worton 75) In this avowal, Augustine asserts that a human being cannot pass his own judgement upon the matter of salvation; God himself is the final judge. Accordingly, from this perspective, both despair and presumption are in opposition to trust. The characters’ act of waiting in Beckett’s play demonstrates not only their resistance to both despair and presumption, but also their trust in Godot. They entrust Godot with their future:

Estragon: if he [Mr.Godot] comes  
Vladimir: We’ll be saved. (87)

This dialogue supports Anders’ argument: “it is in Godot, who never appears in the play, and yet is a pivotal character, that Vladimir’s hope for salvation lies.” (35) If Godot is someone who is responsible for salvation, their obedience in waiting for Godot is seen as an act of humility, and trust in salvation.

Salvation presupposes sin and repentance: “I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.” (Psalm 51:3) In Beckett’s play, Vladimir’s acknowledgement of his sin is inferred from his perplexity at the story of the good thief and the bad thief. When he obsessively repeats this story, Vladimir identifies

himself with the most wretched and abandoned sinners, who were crucified along with Christ. Having qualms of conscience, Vladimir expresses his desire to expiate his guilt:

Vladimir: Suppose we repented.

Estragon: Repented what?

Vladimir: Oh ... [He *reflects*] We wouldn't have to go into details.

Estragon: Our being born?

[Vladimir *breaks into a hearty laugh which he immediately stifles, his hand pressed to his pubis, his face contorted.*] (3)

Schopenhauer elaborates that “the true meaning of tragedy is more profound insight, that what the hero pays for is not his particular sins but original sin, i.e. the guilt of existence itself.” (qtd. in Kaufman 291) Tragedy, Schopenhauer insists, is concerned with the sin of existence, rather than a specific personal guilt. Similarly, Beckett expresses his own idea of tragedy: “the tragic figure represents the expiation of original sin, of the original and eternal sin of him and all his ‘socii malorum,’ the sin of having been born.” (*Proust* 67) This concept of ontological sin is profoundly theological.

According to Catholicism, it is believed that humanity is afflicted with the original sin, committed by the first man, Adam. What Adam has transmitted to humanity is not only sin, but also death; physical death as a consequence of the original sin. Beckett's characters' wishful longing to absolve themselves of guilt represents the deep-seated human desire to be redeemed from mortality and death. However, Beckett, like Schopenhauer, does not attach any serious ethical or theological meaning to the concept of sin. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* addresses a cosmic sin of humanity. The characters simply express their need to atone for having been born. Although Vladimir feels like repenting for something, he does not know what to repent for; he has no clear comprehension of sin. This makes him feel both

embarrassed and perplexed, as implied in his awkward laugh and contorted facial expressions. The reason why Vladimir is unsure about his transgression is that he lives in a morally ambiguous world. This is presented through the grey, washed out colour of the stage. The obscure colour, in between white and black, symbolizes a world that has no clear line between good and bad. When there is neither sin, nor anything to repent, the idea of salvation becomes irrelevant. This is Vladimir's dilemma. While his heart desires salvation through the repentance of his sin, he is unable to articulate what exactly his sin is, as Mary Bryden notes that "neither man has a clear apprehension of what they could repent of, and the plan is aborted." (115)

Salvation is linked to sin. Consequently when sin is indefinite, salvation remains uncertain. Ironically this uncertainty invites Beckett's characters to have a strong faith. Despite all their doubt, and uncertainty, they hope that Godot will soon emerge. Vladimir's steadfast faith in Godot bears a profound religious pathos: Vladimir: "let us persevere in what we have resolved." (61) His perseverance in trusting God(ot) is compared to the actions of saints:

Vladimir: Or for night to fall. [*Pause.*] We have kept our appointment, and that's an end to that. We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much? (72)

Night draws on without any sign of Godot's arrival. Yet Vladimir is still waiting. The fact that they have kept their promise gives him a sense of nobleness in his will and spirit. Their steadfast spirit in waiting matches Saints' stoic endurance. They may not be as pious as saints, but nonetheless, Vladimir considers that their continued perseverance can be counted as heroic as the honourable act of saints, who suffer for faith. Vladimir's patient endurance of sufferings of life is noble and profoundly tragic, as Balthasar describes: "he resists, even in the midst of collapse, where nothing is

possible any more but the nobility of endurance” (114):

Estragon : What do you expect, you always wait till the last moment.

Vladimir: [*Musingly.*] The last moment ... [He *meditates.*]

Hope deferred maketh the something sick, who said that? (2)

In the depth of despair, however, the play displays slight pauses of relief – laughter.

### ***Beckett and Comedy***

“life is too important to be taken seriously.” by Oscar Wilde

The aphorism of an earlier Irish playwright adumbrates Beckett’s way of presenting life on stage. Life presented in *Waiting for Godot* is not always as depressing as it appears; in the midst of despair, there is rhythm of joy. In the play, the bleak empty stage becomes a playground where the characters dance lightly, sing, and joke. Despite profound despair that runs throughout the play, it is highly entertaining. There are certain comic elements in the play.

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like lives.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

...

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They murmur.

Estragon: They rustle. (54)

Beckett’s language, mixed with witty irony has bounce, quick rhythm and reality. It is like the poetry of every day speech, with the rhythms of colloquialism. Just like our ordinary conversation, it is constantly interrupted before sentences are completely finished. Life, like the copious nonsense-words, cannot be interpreted: life is too complicated to be comprehended. Nonetheless, Beckett’s theatre exhibits that the seemingly senseless life can still be enjoyed, just as the characters entertain

themselves with nonsense words. Like the babble of muffled voices, Beckett tries to say, life does not have to make sense as long as it can be entertaining.

Considering the two main characters, first of all, Vladimir and Estragon share certain characteristics with clowns. Regarding the typical outfit of the clown, Joachim Ritter describes how the clown's costume is:

very different from normal clothes, but the long gloves, the countless jackets, the giant trousers represent a distortion, a perversion of ordinary dress. He carries around with him a meaningful piece of equipment, a garden-gate, but it is totally detached from its usual context, and so he uses it to keep entering the realm of nonsense, which becomes nonsense, when set against sense, and thereby raises the liberating laughter that breaks down the barriers of seriousness and moderation. (qtd. in Iser 214)

Just like the clown's appearance, the characters in Beckett's play do not look quite presentable. They wear clothes that do not fit their bodies well; it is either too big or too short. Their clothes are also both pitifully and ridiculously shabby. The props that they carry like the hats and boots also serve to create a comical impression. Wearing a gentleman's hat makes the two tramps look absurd, rather than dignified. Plus, Estragon's obsession with his stinking boots raises laughter from the audience. They are never functional; they are to be played with, rather than worn. Yet, they are not completely meaningless objects. They have a symbolic meaning. Vladimir's hat identifies him as a thinker, whereas Estragon's boot presents him as a physical being. In the following dialogue, for instance, Estragon is irritated by his ill-fitting boots that hurt his feet:

Estragon: [*feebly*.] Help me!

Vladimir: It hurts?

Estragon: Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!

Vladimir:[*Angrily*.] No one ever suffers but you. I don't count. (2)

Estragon exaggerates minor physical discomfort, as if it is something truly grave. Estragon's inability to deal with a trivial matter makes him laughable. Estragon is

weak not only physically, but also intellectually. He is intellectually below the average, as Bryden states: “Vladimir’s inability to interest Estragon in his conundrum indicates an important incompatibility between the two men.” (111)

What makes Estragon really comical is his pretence. He pretends to be as intellectual as Vladimir by repeating what Vladimir says:

Estragon: What do we do now?  
Vladimir: While waiting.  
Estragon: While waiting.  
[*Silence.*]  
Vladimir: We could do our exercises.  
Estragon: Our movements.  
Vladimir: Our elevations.  
Estragon: Our relaxations.  
Vladimir: Our elongations.  
Estragon: Our relaxations.  
Vladimir: To warm us up.  
Estragon: To calm us down. (68)

Estragon is simply imitating Vladimir’s words, rather than creating his own expressions. Estragon is not a creative thinker. His mimicked discourse discloses his inability to be independent. His childish dependency on the other traveller is shameless, as is evident in Act one when he begs Pozzo for bones, the leftovers from Pozzo’s meal: “excuse me, Mister, the bones, you won’t be wanting the bones.”(20) In Act two, however, their positions are reversed. It is now Pozzo who asks Estragon for the favour:

Pozzo: Help! I’ll pay you!  
Estragon: How much?  
Pozzo: One hundred francs!  
Estragon: It’s not enough.  
Vladimir: I wouldn’t go so far as that.  
Estragon: You think it’s enough? (73)

Estragon’s response to Vladimir is funny, because he takes Vladimir’s saying literally, missing the main point of it. Estragon simply does not understand Vladimir’s

reproach, instead he disgraces himself by asking for money. Nonetheless, Estragon's character is not just superficial and shallow. Although he is not educated enough to suppress his true feelings and needs, he has a childlike frankness. His childlike innocence makes him both comical and endearing simultaneously.

The clown in general is anonymous, as Joachim Ritter notes: "the clown is simply the outcast, the dropout, yet he proclaims this non-conformity not by antithesis of meaning, but by an extreme distortion of it." (qtd. in Iser 214) Like the clown, Beckett's protagonists are "the outcasts" and "the dropouts." The two homeless seedy men are aimlessly wandering around in the middle of nowhere. They are clown-like not because their behaviour transgresses social convention, but because it twists the conventional norm of action that involves significance, and consequence. Beckett refuses to attach any definite meaning or importance to the character's action. Pointless action is delivered with dark humour. In the play, Beckett's characters occupy themselves with various physical activities like eating carrots, "playing with boots, exchanging hats, trousers falling down, characters running on and off." (McDonald 33) The actors perform these sadly futile and trivial actions with genuine seriousness. This evokes laughter mixed with a sense of hollowness.

Whatever they do, they are bound to fail. This becomes a source of comedy, as Wolfgang Iser posits that "this clowning effect comes about through their constant failure, and their inability to learn from their failures, as evidenced by their endless repetitions." (214) Their repetitive failures, Iser insists, make them clowns. As with clowns, failure in Beckett's theatre does not bring any necessary change or enlightenment to the characters. They do not learn anything from their falls. Instead,

they comically repeat the same kind of mistake, as if it has never happened before. In this regard, Iser goes on to note that “even though with constant failure they behave as if the situation did not exist.” (Iser 214) Regarding the character’s downfall, however, Iser gives no specific example. He only suggests the structure of comedy in general. It is important to understand in what sense the characters are considered to be failures.

In a physical sense, they keep falling down to the ground. In the second Act, Pozzo has fallen and is helplessly lying on the ground. Witnessing this, Vladimir and Estragon try to help:

Vladimir: He[Pozzo] wants to get up.

Estragon: Then why doesn’t he?

Vladimir: He wants us to help him to get up.

Estragon: Then why don’t we? What are we waiting for?

*[They help Pozzo to his feet, let him go. He falls.]*

Vladimir: We must hold him.

*[They get him up again. Pozzo sags between them, his arms round their necks.]*

Feeling better? (77)

Despite their struggle to help Pozzo, they cannot even support themselves; helping someone else seems to be beyond their power. Although they are ridiculously powerless to make themselves stand up, they still keep trying to help others. The characters’ effort appears to be completely useless, as it brings about no change or improvement in the situation. Instead, it makes things worse. This makes them laughable. The scene continues:

Vladimir: We’ve proved we are, by helping him.

Estragon: Exactly. Would we have helped him if we weren’t his friends?

...

Pozzo: “You are not highwaymen?”

Estragon: Highwaymen! Do we look like highwaymen?

Vladimir: Damn it, can’t you see the man is blind! (77)

By offering help to someone in need, Vladimir and Estragon proudly consider



themselves to be good people whereas Pozzo thinks the exact opposite. He, in his blindness, regards them as thieves rather than friends. Despite their best intentions, the main characters are destined to fail. Being aware of that they are doomed to be defeated, they come to the conclusion that there is “nothing to be done.” (W.G. 1) As for the futility of their action, it can be derived from Camus’ philosophical idea of the absurd, discussed in the previous chapter. Beckett, however, extracts the seriousness of the philosophical concept, and presents it on stage more light-heartedly. Importantly, Beckett depicts the insignificance of his comical characters with affection and sympathy, rather than cold sarcasm. Accordingly, the audience is touched by their lowliness and simplicity.

Beckett’s comedy is physical and metaphysical simultaneously. In the scene above, the four characters are, repeatedly, positioned prone on their backs or on their stomachs, and their bodies are idiosyncratically tangled. This provokes not only laughter, but also delivers a symbolic meaning. The physical estrangement reflects their incomprehensibly muddled life, where they are helplessly stuck. Their failure goes beyond the physical level. In a more profound sense, despite the turmoil of their lives, they refuse to abandon it, as Beckett explained to Tom Drive: “the only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess. It is not a mess you can make sense of.” (qtd. in Graver 219) Beckett’s world is a chaos rather than a cosmos. It is disordered, fragmented, irrational, and incomprehensible. In the chaotic world, where logic and reason are in doubt, his people are trapped without fathoming a solution for escape. When they find themselves in a great chaos, where they are embarrassingly caught out, they laugh at it. Laughter sets them free from the tangled situation. It has a liberating effect as Iser notes: “This laughter releases us from entanglements by

enabling us to declare that the toppling of positions in comic situations is something we are not going to take seriously.” (204) Through laughter, one can transcend an overwhelmingly complicated situation, even if only temporarily. Iser continues to explain: “For laughter, in Plessner’s words, is a crisis response by the body when cognitive or emotive faculties prove incapable of mastering a situation.” (206) As Iser identifies, laughter can be considered as a physical reaction to the crisis which a person fails to keep under control; the uncontrollable situation becomes a comic motif in Beckett’s theatre.

Their repeated bodily entanglement reflects the characters life as a state of “immense confusion,” as Vladimir confirms. (72) They are completely lost, not knowing what to do with their muddled lives. When their outrageously chaotic lives go beyond their cognitive and emotional control, they realize that it is impossible to comprehend the complexity of their situation. Therefore, they suspend their intellectual and analytic mind. Instead they choose to entertain themselves, as Vladimir states “I’ve been better entertained.”(33) By inventing various entertainments like jokes, dancing, or singing, they laugh at and relieve the tension that is created by confusion, and disorientation. Beckett transforms the riddle of life into something that we can play with, and laugh at, rather than analyzing it seriously in an intellectual way. By laughing at the funny side of life, they transcend their predicament. Laughter in Beckett’s play is not just a naive escapism from reality. It has a healing effect, triumphing over despair, as Kavanagh notes: “The remedy is that Beckett has put despair and futility on the stage for us to laugh at them. And we do laugh.” (28) Beckett’s laughter exudes a redemptive power to transcend distress in the present. In this way, Beckett’s drama embodies Christian message of joy in

Redemption, as Paul Burbridge and Murray Watts state: “drama is a gift from God to help us explore the world, enjoy it, to be moved by suffering, to laugh at the funny side of life, to provoke ourselves and others to thought.”(112)

## Conclusion

“What’s all this about?” (*Waiting for Godot* 5)

It is all about compassionate understanding of human fragility and weakness. The little and poor characters in O’Neill’s and Beckett’s plays feel lost and homeless, deprived of a sense of belonging in a domestic, social, and metaphysical sense. Robert in *Beyond the Horizon*, Reuben in *Dynamo*, Mary in *Long Day’s Journey into Night* are isolated from their family, whereas Yank in *The Hairy Ape* is alienated from his work, and human nature. Lazarus in *Lazarus Laughed* is confined in his egoism; his indifference isolates him from other human beings. The isolation of Beckett’s characters is more extreme than that of O’Neill’s: they are completely removed from any domestic and social connections. In a metaphysical sense, most importantly, both O’Neill’s and Beckett’s drama express humanity’s ontological solitude; man is ultimately alone in the face of death. Robert, Reuben, and Yank, despite their fear, all die alone. Likewise, O’Neill’s heroine, Mary, and Beckett’s protagonists, Estragon and Vladimir, are on the verge of suicide. Their helplessness in the face of the suffering they have to endure evokes our compassion.

The works by O’Neill and Beckett have been criticized as being bleak, depressing, desolate, and dark. In the nadir of their pessimism, there is the ‘death of God.’ O’Neill’s and Beckett’s interpretations of the Nietzschean phrase are not exactly identical. O’Neill’s *Dynamo*, for instance, dramatizes the death of the ‘old’ God, who reflects a coercive patriarchal society. In Beckett’s *Waiting For Godot*, the ‘death of God’ signifies the death of meaning and of purpose for life. Interestingly, however, their theatrical embodiment of the ‘death of God’ delivers the Biblical allusion of the

death of the Son of God, Christ on the Cross. In this connection, the Christian ideas of 'passion' and 'redemption' are deeply embedded in their plays. Passion in their drama is created by a clash between despair, and hope in the possibility of redemption. While their characters helplessly descend into fathomless despair or emptiness of life, they cling onto their vigorous hope in something or someone 'beyond the horizon' of their desolate lives.

Robert and Juan in *The Fountain* dream of a utopian world, full of mystic beauty, primitive purity, and innocence. Yank tries to discover human values in the material world. Reuben looks for a compassionate and caring God-Mother as a substitute for the oppressive and angry God-Father. Lazarus attempts to liberate himself from the fear of death by indulging in a Dionysian orgy, which offers the illusion of eternal life. Mary yearns for the innocent age in the past when she was a pious Catholic girl. Estragon and Vladimir wait for someone to save them from their misery. The characters' imagination makes it possible for them to bear their unbearably shameful lives. However, in the cases of Robert, Juan, Yank, and Reuben, their illusion turns out to be a "hopeless hope," leading them to an unredeemable self-destruction at the end. On the other hand, the finale is ambiguous in *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *Waiting for Godot*; the dramatic conflict between despair and hope is held in tension without clear resolution. The suspended ending in both plays implies that there is something residual - hope or the possibility of redemption.

Redemption necessarily presupposes human fragility and failure. O'Neill's and Beckett's characters relapse into repetitive failures. Robert, Juan, and Mary fail to move from their own illusion to reality. Lazarus fails to overcome his egoism. Yank fails to find his human identity. Reuben fails to reconcile his religious faith

with science. Estragon and Vladimir fail to find meaning in their waiting, whereas they also fail to end their seemingly hopeless waiting. In the case of Mary, and of Estragon and Vladimir, especially, their biggest failure is found in their inability to move on from their present predicament where they are so helplessly stuck. Their powerlessness engenders pessimism that engulfs them, leaving them unable to exit from the situational ambiguity in which they are trapped. The characters face a futile search for a way out of their unhappy situation.

A pessimistic mood runs through the plays and it remains to the end. O'Neill and Beckett bring to their play the crisis that individuals encounter in a world that leaves them struggling: struggling to overcome the hard circumstances, which, against their will, become uncontrollably chaotic. Whatever they do, they are doomed to fail. Painfully experiencing that they have no power to alter the shape of their lives for the better, they beg for aid from a higher power:

Mary: I went to the shrine and prayed to the Blessed Virgin and found peace again because I knew she heard my prayer and would always love me and see no harm ever came to me as long as I never lost my faith in her. (*Long Day's Journey Into Night* 110)

Estragon: [*Stopping, brandishing his fists, at the top of his voice.*]

God have pity on me!

Vladimir:[*Vexed.*] And me?

Estragon: On me! On me! Pity! On me! (69) ;

Vladimir : Christ have mercy on us! [*Silence*] (85).

Mary's long confessional narrative, and Didi and Gogo's compulsively repetitive words reflect their desperate need for help. Yet, what they want is more than a logical explanation. They look for compassionate understanding and spiritual consolation. In this respect, Mary's heartfelt cry for help from the Blessed Virgin Mary, and Didi and Gogo's for God's mercy demonstrate their deep spirituality. Enduring the bleak

existence, empty of clear meaning and resolution, something stronger than the pessimism woven around their characters is available to them. The least they can do is live in the hope that comes with religious faith. Accordingly Mary, and Estragon and Vladimir, despite their constant setbacks, remain in “the battling of faith, battling, madly, if you will, for possibility, because possibility is the only salvation.” (Kierkegaard 38) Their restless “battling of faith” in the possibility of salvation makes them tragic and noble in spirit. In this sense, therefore, the authors’ theatrical work goes beyond Nietzschean nihilism.

O’Neill’s and Beckett’s plays neither affirm nor negate Christian belief in redemption. Instead, they depict humanity’s anxiety about salvation and nothingness. Being tormented by these two different possibilities – hope in salvation, and despair in meaninglessness –, the characters reveal something deeply embedded in the human heart – a spiritual longing for God: a personal, compassionate God, whose existence is found in humanity. Mary’s faith in the Holy Virgin Mary is closely tied with her trust in her family’s love and forgiveness, as O’Neill’s writes to his wife, Carlotta, in the preface of the play, *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*:

I mean it as a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me the faith in love [that] enabled me to face my dad at last and write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness of all the four haunted Thrones.

Similarly, Estragon and Vladimir’s belief in Godot is inseparably linked with their love for each other: Estragon says to Vladimir “You’re my only hope.”(10) They find their redemptive hope in compassion that is tied with their friendship.

Those characters’ pilgrimage in waiting for redemption through passion is brilliantly captured in the title, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. Here the day signifies restlessness, pain, suffering, conflict, and passion whereas the night denotes peace

and rest. After the long suffering days of journey, O'Neill's protagonist, Mary expects to arrive at the still and peaceful night, where she can finally find repose for her restlessly homeless soul. This symbolic meaning of day and night is shared by Beckett:

Vladimir, *looking at the sky*, repeatedly says: will night never come? (26,29)

Pozzo : behind this veil of gentleness and peace night is charging.(31)

Vladimir: I have lived through this long day and I can assure you  
it is very near the end of its repertory.(78)

The many-coloured impressions of troubled 'day' are all eventually absorbed by the comforting embrace of 'night.' In this, I find an answer for those questions, addressed in the introduction of this thesis: "Que voulez-vous?"(W.G.56); "What is it I'm looking for? "(L.J.N.107) :

In our rhythm of earthly life we tired of light. We are glad  
when the day ends, when the play ends; and ecstasy  
is too much pain.

We are children quickly tired: children who are up in the  
Night and fall asleep as the rocket is fired; and the day  
is long for work or play.

We tired of distraction or concentration, we sleep and are  
glad to sleep.

‘ The Rock’ in *Choruses*, T.S. Eliot



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